Rival Perlis Umno groups clash at PWTC
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By Ridzwan Abdullah, The Malay Mail

Internal rifts that have been plaguing Perlis Umno for some time worsened last week after rival groups from the Kangar and Arau divisions clashed at the Putra World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur over candidates in the general election.

In the 8.30am incident last Thursday, about 150 Kangar Umno division members gathered at the Umno headquarters grounds at PWTC's Menara Dato Onn.

They had taken the overnight journey from Kangar in several hired buses with a sole mission: To send home the message that they will not accept any "parachute" candidates from outside the division.

This is in the event incumbent MP and former Umno secretary-general Mohd Radzi Sheikh Ahmad (right in photo) was not selected this time around.

Party sources told The Malay Mail that several leaders from the division were also seen at PWTC last Thursday.

They included state executive councillor and Sena assemblyperson Abdul Jamil Saad, division secretary Aziz Had, youth chief Aziz Majid and Norhani Hamid, the Puteri head.

"The group made it loud and clear that they want Radzi back as Kangar MP, and if that wasn't possible, then his replacement must only be someone from Kangar itself," a source said.

Protest mode

According to the source, the group had gone into protest mode after talk began circulating that Fathul Bari Mat Jahaya, Umno's young ulama and rising star, would be replacing Radzi.

Fathul, 33, who is Pertubuhan Ilmuan Malaysia chief executive officer, is Penang born.

To show that they were serious, the group came prepared with a memorandum they wanted delivered to party president Najib Abdul Razak.

However, unknown to them, Arau division members had also organised their own road trip to PWTC in a bid to get Arau MP and incumbent Ismail Kassim, who is former Perlis menteri besar Shahidan Kassim's brother, retained as a candidate.

The supporters had learnt that Shahidan (right) had been lobbying for his old seat with top party leadership, and wanted to express their dissatisfaction, although the source added that Ismail, personally, has no problem making way for his brother.

Ismail had defeated PAS deputy spiritual adviser Haron Din by a narrow margin in 2008 but prior to that, in 1999, had written himself in the history books by becoming the first Umno parliamentary candidate in Perlis to lose to a PAS candidate.

The source said that the Kangar group had already been incensed by talk that Shahidan and Ismail were allegedly behind the move to get Fathul Bari to replace Radzi.

When these two groups crossed paths on PWTC grounds that day, there was a clash of words which quickly turned into a heated argument.

This lasted a few minutes before cooler heads from both groups kept the situation from getting out of hand.

'Just a minor skirmish'

The incident has since been played down by state party leaders as just a minor skirmish but political observers see it as yet another indication that BN Perlis is cruising to an embarrassing and unprecedented defeat in the coming general election.

Menteri Besar and State Umno chief Md Isa Sabu (left) was learnt to have said that the groups had the right to voice their sentiments, the source said.

Shahidan, when contacted, denied that the Arau group were at PWTC.

"Yes, the Kangar division members were there but not Arau," he said. He added he was confident of being selected again in Arau.

"Yes, I am confident of contesting. Let's wait for the announcement and then I will comment further."

Perlis has always been BN's fixed deposit, and despite internal strife within the state Umno liaison creeping in the last decade, it had still managed to deliver.

Although there are only three parliamentary and 15 state seats in Perlis, the internal politicking within the Umno set up has gone so bad that observers say is paving the way for a possible, and historic, Opposition takeover.

Padang Besar MP Azmi Khalid, the source said, has indicated that will not contest this time around and he is most likely to be replaced by Zahidi Zainul Abidin, the current Padang Besar division chief.

"The question is, why are the supporters listening to all these rumours and speculation when the party president himself has not finalised anything.

"If this sort of bad blood can happen just based on talk then maybe the party can expect

worse problems internally when the real list is announced," an observer said.

He said in difficult situations like these, the Umno leadership will always need more time; first to pacify those dropped or not chosen, and secondly to identify and act on those with sabotage on their minds.

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