

All eyes on Mahathir's son as Umno battle looms

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By Abdul Rahim Sabri

ANALYSIS Mukhriz Mahathir is the man to watch as Umno members across the nation ask the same question: Will he accept or decline the grassroots backing for him to mount a battle for the vice-presidency in October?

NONE If he says "yes", then of the three incumbent Umno VPs, Hishamuddin Hussein should be feeling most vulnerable.

According to Umno sources, the other two incumbent Umno VPs - Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and Shafie Apdal - have stronger grounding. Shafie may be shaken a little by Mukhriz's candidacy but he can count on loyal Sabah Umno members.

Besides Mukhriz, former Malacca chief minister Mohd Ali Rustam and former Negeri Sembilan chief minister Mohd Isa Samad may also bid for the VP position. However, Umno sources said their bids are unlikely to gain traction.

However, Mukhriz may not yet be a shoo-in candidate. Based on statements made by the three VP incumbents, Umno sources said they may collaborate and back one another to block new challengers.

Putting together the total number of Umno divisions in Perak, Johor and Sabah, from where the three incumbent VPs hail, they already have the support of 75 divisions. This is almost 40 percent of the 191 Umno divisions in the country.

"The stated preference of Umno president Najib Abdul Razak to keep his current vice-presidents Zahid, Shafie and Hishammuddin, is also likely to get the support from Umno divisions in Pahang and Selangor, which were Najib's strongholds during the May 5 general election," an Umno source said.

"On paper, the trio may then have the support of up to 111 divisions... giving them a high chance of retaining their positions," the source added.

Based on Umno's one vote per division system, the VP candidates must get the majority of the 191 votes.

Can Mukhriz mount a serious challenge?

Mukhriz's advantage is that he represents Umno's renewal and the younger

generation, another Umno source said.

NONE In fact, his father, former Umno president Dr Mahathir Mohamad, opened a path for Mukhriz when he recently stressed that the forthcoming Umno elections must give the opportunity to young leaders to come up, to ensure the survival of the Malay-based party, which currently has the most seats in Parliament.

The 49-year old Mukhriz's bid is therefore axiomatic of "the silent majority" in Umno across the country, who may wish for some drastic reforms in the party's direction, after BN failed to regain a two-thirds majority in Parliament in the 13th GE, which it has held onto for most of its 56 years of rule since independence.

For some, Kedah Menteri Besar Mukhriz, who had helped BN seize power in the northern state against Pakatan Rakyat in the 13th GE, represents that opportunity to usher renewal into the party.

Looking back at the contest for the Umno Youth chief's post in 2008, Mukhriz also got the most nominations, ranging from 74 Umno divisions, compared with the other two candidates, Dr Mohd Khir Toyo (62) and Khairy Jamaluddin (53).

Despite failing to win the final vote, Mukhriz however managed to get 232 votes against 304 votes obtained by Khairy and 284 votes that went to Khir Toyo.

There are those who had speculated then that if it had been a straight fight between Khairy and Mukhriz, the possibility of a victory in favour of Mahathir's son would have been higher.

Even then, Mukhriz did not have a strong support base in Umno against Khir Toyo and Khairy, but was able to draw support from Umno divisions across the country to raise the total vote.

And of course, Mukhriz's association with his father can only help. Mahathir is still a force to be reckoned with in Umno, being its longest serving president, and this is seen as an advantage to help Mukhriz win if he decides to run for the post.

With the support of Kedah Umno leadership and the new voting system in selecting the top Umno leadership, many in Umno view that his position as menteri besar and chairman of Kedah Umno, Mukhriz is certainly capable of upsetting one of the incumbent vice-presidents.

Certainly, all of this depends on what this evening's announcement will be: Is Mukhriz, the son of Mahathir, ready to get into the ring?

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