

Umno's problems make it tougher to beat Anwar
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Umno faces a daunting task in wresting Permatang Pauh from PKR, and it's not merely because Barisan Nasional has to contend with a formidable opponent in opposition icon Anwar Ibrahim. MCPX

All is not well in the Permatang Pauh Umno division because of current infighting among several of their leaders to control the division leadership

Some 48 of the division's 91 branches have held their annual general meeting (AGM) and their nominations for the division chairperson post are split among several local leaders.

abdul jalil abdul majidIncumbent chief Abdul Jalil Abdul Majid (photo), his arch rival and former division deputy chief Ahmad Saad, Seberang Jaya state assemblyperson Arif Shah Omar Shah and even former Permatang Pauh election candidate Pirdaus Ismail have received a fair share of nominations.

Umno leaders observe that the split in the division could seriously dampen BN's attempt to seize the parliamentary seat, which Anwar has made his political bastion since his electoral debut in 1982.

Acknowledging that the battle for Permatang Pauh division leadership would endanger BN's attempt to pose any challenge to Anwar, Umno has wisely decided to postpone the remaining 43 branch AGMs until after the by-election.

Branch polls postponed

Umno deputy president Najib Abdul Razak said the postponement was imperative to "avert infighting and consolidate the division members in focussing on winning the by-election."

anwar ibrahim wan azizah permatang pauh by election 310708The deputy premier was in Permatang Pauh today to oversee the BN preparations for the by-election, which was called after incumbent PKR president Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail stepped down late last month to pave the way for her husband's return to parliament.

Nomination day is on Saturday Aug 16 and polling Aug 26, a Tuesday.

In the last March general election, it is learnt that even Umno members had voted for Wan Azizah, and Najib said "the party leadership is determined not to allow it to recur."

"We knew the reasons for Umno members voting against BN the last time and would address the issues effectively this time," he said.

The BN election machinery is being mobilised and the campaign strategy had been outlined.

"We cannot allow any disruptive elements to sway our concentration," said Najib when asked to elaborate on the meeting proceedings between him and the BN by-election team today.

However, he declined to reveal the possible BN-Umno candidate for the seat, saying that "the party leadership would decide on it in due time."

Although Permatang Pauh Umno can heave a sigh of relief with the postponement of branch elections, the Umno national leadership is also besieged by another dilemma – choosing the right candidate for the contest.

Leading the packed list of contenders for the hot seat is the division's unanimous choice Abdul Jalil. However, insiders had claimed that he is only the division leadership choice, not that of the grassroots.

No 'outsiders' please

Some are saying that the grassroots want former state Permatang Pasir assemblyperson Ahmad Saad, an ex-ally of Anwar.

Other names bandied about are Ariff Shah, state Umno treasurer Zainal Abidin Osman and former PKR Youth chief Mohd Ezam Mohd Nor.

Permatang Pauh Umno leaders and members are said to have hinted that they would not take a keen interest in the by-election if 'outsiders' like Zainal Abidin from Nibong Tebal Umno or Ezam is chosen.

In the previous two elections, the 'outsider' factor in Pirdaus Ismail was also blamed for Umno's defeat.

permatang pauh parliamentary seat election results 180108If Umno is serious about ruling out 'outsiders', the party can choose one of the 3As – Abdul Jalil, Ahmad Saad and Ariff Shah.

Ariff Shah is also a state assemblyperson and this could rule him out, leaving only Abdul Jalil and Ahmad Saad as contenders.

Whoever Umno chooses, the candidate must be accepted by the division, state and national Umno leadership, Barisan Nasional component parties and more importantly, Permatang Pauh constituents must be "comfortable with him."

Having taken all these factors into consideration, it would still be a uphill battle to defeat the PKR political star.

Many Permatang Pauh voters see the by-election as a battleground for the 'confidence vote' for either the BN federal administration or Anwar's premier aspiration.

"The by-election is not about choosing a MP, but to express the people's wish for a change.

"It's about choosing which type of government one prefers," said a political observer.

It is a 'referendum', as Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng puts it, for Anwar's desire to become the prime minister and initiate reforms to the country's political governance.