

Umno Youth : who will it be?
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The pursuit to win the most coveted post at the pinnacle of Umno Youth adds an interesting perspective to the political pandemic which has enveloped our nation post the 2008 general election.

In this watershed moment for Malaysia's politics, things move at a breakneck speed that one risks writing stale opinions as new development unfold on an almost daily basis.

Gauging from public reaction after the controversial keris wielding episode by incumbent Umno Youth chief Hishammuddin Hussein Onn during a previous Umno general assembly, the future of the youth wing looked unmistakably bleak.

Hishammuddin was left defenseless in the wake of furore from the non-Malays screaming injustice and labeling him as 'racist' – a remark least wanted by any politician in a multi-racial country.

Political analysts attribute the keris-wielding episode to be one of the factors leading to Barisan Nasional (BN) unexpected's - yet massive – loss in the last general election. Despite many conciliatory explanations from the Umno stalwarts, the anger of the non-Malays knew no bounds. A result of which was subsequently translated into catastrophic votes against BN in the election.

Be that as it may, Umno Youth is still an important pillar to produce mature and ready politicians to navigate the future of Umno, and by virtue of that, the upcoming Umno Youth election is being closely watched by the people whose thirst for a change that has been so palpable of late.

And the tide is fast turning in Umno Youth too. At the nomination stage, the four candidates – or rather just the three of them – now race menacingly against each other to win the requisite nominations, entering into the most interesting power-struggle Umno Youth has ever seen.

Mukhriz Mahathir surpasses other candidates with 61 nominations so far, Khairy Jamaluddin following breathlessly with 37 nominations while Khir Toyo plays catch up with 28 nominations. The last candidate, Zahidi Zainul Abidin, has only one nomination to date.

What is a hard fact to swallow for Khairy – once dubbed the 'most powerful 30-year-old in the country' – is that he has yet to secure enough nominations for the election, weeks after Mukhriz qualified for the race on Oct 12, 2008.

Khairy is still two nominations short. It is rather embarrassing for the prime minister's son-in-law considering that he was once the favorite candidate to head Umno Youth prior to Abdullah announcing his decision not to contest as Umno president in March 2009.

Fending off countless allegations – from the nasty 'Khairy Chronicles' written in 'Malaysia Today' to being rumored as being deeply involved in the country's top decision-making powers – the future of Khairy in Umno Youth now looks uncertain, to say the least.

His political fortunes have plunged at a rather dizzying speed once Abdullah announced the transition of premiership to Najib Abdul Razak in March 2009.

Mukhriz, who was initially deemed as the underdog candidate for the post, has now soared upwards to be the choice for the grassroots possibly due to him openly writing a letter to Abdullah to resign after BN's massive loss in the general election.

He faced the anger of Umno stalwarts in support of Abdullah for this. In fact, rumours of Mukhriz's suspension from Umno were rife immediately after the letter was widely circulated on the Internet. However, Umno showed maturity by merely giving Mukhriz a slap on the wrist for his 'offence'.

However, Mukhriz has an added advantage in the Umno Youth contest - being is a political pedigree would tremendously improve his chances to win.

Meanwhile, Khir Toyo has a lot of tidying up to do post the 2008 general election when his kingdom of power in Selangor disappeared into thin air as the voters picked Pakatan Rakyat to be their choice of government.

His many skeletons in the closet must first be removed to win the hearts of candidates. Issues ranging from temple demolitions, money pumped into and spent by Balkis (an association presided over by his Khir's wife) and his lack of fluency in English all dog Khir's chances of winning the post.

But would the sentiments of the grassroots be translated into votes for Mukhriz? I remain hopeful but unconvinced with the rumour that money-politics within Umno is still raging like an out of control forest fire.

A word of advice to the delegates voting in upcoming Umno elections - vote wisely to bring the changes you advocate so loudly.

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