

Possible 3-way bout for Muhyiddin
Malaysiakini.com
Oct 5, 2008
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With three-fourths of the nominations over, the new Umno leadership is taking shape, with some juicy insights on how the March contest will pan out.

Nominations have to be completed by Nov 9, therefore this will be the busiest weekend, with 49 divisions in play.

The presidential contest is over, the race for the deputy's post is far from over and the field for the vice-presidency's three posts has already expanded to six.

In the wing competitions, there has been no suspension in demands for a Wanita chief contest and the frontrunner for the Youth chief competition has dropped to third in the race - even though he is eligible to contest.

With various leaders inching confidently or otherwise to their nomination minimums, it will be interesting, with his presidency in the bag, to see if incoming president Najib Abdul Razak weighs-in into the remaining contests.

The train is ready to leave the station for the general assembly and election, and some are anxiously waiting for their tickets to come through.

Presidency

Deputy Prime Minister Najib is the president-elect of Umno.

The political obituary of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah will be long, but soon forgotten as the party readies itself for the son of its third president, Abdul Razak.

The Kelantanese might claim that institutional pressure and a climate of docility has prevented him from having decent tilt at the contest, as only his division Gua Musang gave him a nomination.

Deputy presidency

Only one is a confirmed candidate - International Trade and Industry Minister Muhyiddin Yassin with 78 nods - but there are two outsiders within range to secure their own nominations.

Although Rural and Regional Development Minister Muhammad Muhd Taib lags in third place with 29 nominations, 10 short of the minimum 39, he will rely on home comforts this weekend to get him closer to the target.

If the Selangor divisions of Hulu Langat, Sungai Besar, Hulu Selangor and Kelana Jaya come to the aid of the former state leader, then his passage to becoming a qualified candidate would be a smoother one.

A clutch of wins from Pahang last weekend - Jerantut, Bera and Kuala Kurau point to more gains this weekend, perhaps in Temerloh, Lipis and Maran.

However, if the man more commonly referred to as Mike Tyson falters in his own region, then his candidacy will hang in the balance.

Although Malacca Chief Minister Mohd Ali Rustam is closer to the 39 count, he still lacks the 'big state' base to challenge Muhyiddin, who is from the Umno bastion, Johor.

Muhyiddin, if given a chance, would prefer to square off with Ali Rustam rather than Muhammad in a one-on-one fight.

However, with the possibility of both making the final round, Muhyiddin may still count it as a tactical advantage.

A three-way contest will likelier benefit the perceived natural choice, the longer serving vice-president, Muhyiddin.

Neither Mohd Ali or Muhammad can be blamed for having one eye on their own nominations and another on the other's progress throughout the weekend.

Eyes will also centre on Pekan - Najib's division - and the prime minister's Kepala Batas, which are good barometers of how March will be for all candidates in all categories.

Muhyiddin has associated himself with a Najib presidency, but whether Najib feels the same way will be measured somewhat when Pekan decides on Saturday. A win for the other two contestants might open up the race even more.

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's division on Sunday would be even more symbolic if it gives the qualifying nomination to either of the trailing candidates.

The deputy prime ministership is at stake and everyone should be curious how the present prime minister and his deputy rate these candidates.

Vice-presidency

Education Minister Hishammuddin Hussein has followed his cousin Najib's lead and has had steady and strong momentum.

With 110 nominations, or 77 percent of the divisions so far, it would take an amazing turn of events for him not to secure the party vice-presidency.

Luckily silver and bronze matter, and this is where it gets intriguing.

Two ministers - Prime Minister Department's Ahmad Zahid Hamidi on 77 and Culture, Arts and Heritage's Shafie Apdal on 64 - hold those spots, but they are far from being safe.

It is their large state base, Perak and Sabah respectively, and not having other leaders from their states fighting for the top five contests which will help leverage support from their home states and encourage unity votes from other states.

Higher Education Minister Khaled Nordin has a healthy 60 nominations, however, he has the

disadvantage of being the second Johor candidate in the race.

Former Negeri Sembilan menteri besar Isa Samad has reached the magic 20 nominations and will return for the contest he topped in 2004. Never mind the three years in political oblivion he spent after being stripped of both his vice-presidency and federal territory ministership for allegedly playing money politics, he can win again.

For someone, on the face of it, with low political capital and from a lesser state, his ability to rummage enough nominations makes him the official dark-horse.

Few expected him to get through in 2004, fewer expected him to top the vice-presidential field then. A repeat in 2009 is not impossible.

Home Minister Syed Hamid Albar might be keen to make more right wing favoured decisions like the Hindraf ban and Internal Security Act arrests, to shore up the conservative base in the party. With a qualifying 24 now, he is only making up the field and trailing more importantly the two other Johor candidates.

A more feisty political climate in around March might just help him - this is a wait and see candidacy.

With 18 each, supreme council members Jamaluddin Jarjis and Rais Yatim will be greatly disappointed if they don't get two more over the weekend, and make it a eight-man field.

With Pahang meetings scheduled, Jamaluddin is likelier to be confirmed sooner.

Wanita chief

The story is the same, will special minister Shahrizat Abdul Jalil renege on her deal to have a no-contest? Patience will see her replacing incumbent Kuala Kangsar MP Rafidah Aziz as acting president next year.

This will however lose her the neutrals in the wings, which might make her less formidable for a contest against possibly Tourism Minister Azalina Othman Said in the Umno elections after next.

Irrespective, the nominations for Shahrizat are still streaming in even if they are not flooding in at 66, compared to Rafidah's 103.

Umno Youth

It is an open contest- but very few would have expected deputy youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin to be trailing third.

With 51 nominations to Youth exco members Mukhriz Mahathir's 71 and Mohamad Khir Toyo's 56, the Rembau MP should be rightfully worried.

Mindful that he won the last bout uncontested, Khairy will have to look at ways to appeal to the wing's base, which is primarily far-right.

Over the years, the Oxford man has dropped his western education air about himself in

public, but will that have the same effect when compared to a more grassroots nationalist like Khir? The Sungai Besar assemblyperson is a locally trained dentist with a humbler background.

khir toyo 181207That may explain why in the home stretch, the former Selangor menteri besar has inched passed the prime minister's son-in-law after always being behind.

There is talk that Mukhriz's support outside Kedah has been more about the anti-Khairi sentiments in the party. That many voted him because it was less risky to vote for a former prime minister's son - when balanced with Khir.

Being outspoken is a key part of being Youth chief, and Mukhriz's hesitance to a debate with the other candidates shows exactly where his own ability to exhilarate a crowd or galvanise the party stands.

It will be a very interesting four months for this wing.

Last week - home stretch

The main observation will be on the deputy and vice-president contests, not as much to decide the final candidates as much as look for patterns and indications on how March will turn out.

As mentioned, the Kepala Batas and Pekan votes will be good barometers.

When the dust settles on Sunday, not only will the list of final candidates be out, but so will the prognosis for the March election outcome.

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