

Umno elections: Countdown begins

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Syed Jaymal Zahiid

Whether you love or loathe Umno, there is no denying that its much-anticipated 59th general assembly will be closely monitored when it convenes from this evening.

Deputy president Najib Abdul Razak, who will flag off the meeting, will be the man of the moment.

Having already won the presidency uncontested, it is only a matter of time before he takes over the premiership as well under a transition pact with current head Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Najib is scheduled to open the parallel meetings of the Wanita, Pemuda and Puteri wings at 8pm today. His speech is expected to touch on key issues that have plagued Umno and left it in crisis.

A senior insider said Najib's speech will focus on reform of the party and for it to step up efforts to regain the confidence of younger voters.

"He wants the three wings to focus on getting back support, as we are really losing that race when compared to the opposition," the source said.

"If this means initiating changes that create a bit of discontent within the camp, so be it."

And change is what many expect to see once the delegates begin marching to the ballot boxes tomorrow at 11am. The results will be announced about 10pm.

The key battle in the Wanita wing is between incumbent president Rafidah Aziz against former deputy president Shahrizat Abdul Jalil.

Rafidah, who has led the wing for 19 years, was the first woman to head the International Trade and Industry Ministry, when she was appointed minister by former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad. However, she lost her cabinet post in a reshuffle after the general election in March last year.

Whoever wins will have to work with Kamalia Ibrahim, who won the deputy presidency uncontested. She will be watched to see if her political skills materialise.

Smear campaigns in Youth contest

In the Youth wing, it is still too close to call for all three candidates in the presidential race.

It is learnt that supporters from each camp have embarked on smear campaigns that have escalated over the last two days.

One candidate, former Selangor menteri besar Dr Mohd Khir Toyo told Malaysiakini that he has been the target of smear campaign circulated via SMS.

"What kind of Umno members are these, who are spreading all these lies? We need to change our values," he said.

Mohd Khir will face Mukhriz Mohamad, who is Mahathir's son, and Khairy Jamaluddin, who is Abdullah's son-in-law in the contest.

Whatever the outcome of the elections for all posts, these are interesting times for Umno supporters or

observers alike.

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