

Setting tone for the big meet

With the general election setting the mood for the Umno division meetings which begin today, there will be a toning down of the fiery Malay Agenda rhetoric that dominated last year's meetings.

The Star - 1/7/2007

ONE year is a long time in politics and this could not be truer for Khairy Jamaluddin.

At around this time last year, he was in the news and mostly for the wrong reasons.

The Umno Youth deputy chief was swimming in controversy. He had sparked anger with his remarks about non-Malays taking advantage of a weakened Umno and strenuously defending himself on his business dealings and allegations about his private life.

Khairy was the newsmaker at last year's Umno division meetings.

"I needed to tackle the whole thing head-on, say my piece and move on. It was not the easiest thing but it had to be done. I never thought of giving up or getting upset. I got through it and it's not something I wish on anyone because it can easily break someone who hasn't got a good shield. But I'm pretty sure it won't be the last time either," said Khairy.

But he was apparently upset about the "stupid photo" that had him looking as though in tears.

"All I was doing was wiping sweat off my brow. I don't cry about these things," he insisted.

Much of it is now water under the bridge although the racial remarks still rankle among non-Malay groups.

The Umno division meetings begin on July 1 and Khairy has again been swamped by invitations - 47 to be exact - to officiate at the Youth wing meetings but has been able to accommodate only 26.

Khairy, love or hate him, is hot property in Umno but he is unlikely to be the hot issue this year.

These meetings, which are a sort of warm-up to the Umno general assembly, take place at four levels - the main party, Youth, Wanita and Puteri.

Last year's division meetings culminated in the party's most controversial general assembly in years. The Malay-Muslim disquiet over what they perceived as challenges to Islam and the Malay Agenda set the mood for the assembly while Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's quarrel with his successor added an edge to the proceedings.

Many non-Malays were offended and alarmed by the tone of the debates and speeches centring on Malay rights and aspirations hurt.

"Things will be different this time because of the coming general election," said Kapar Umno Youth chief Faisal Abdullah.

Umno politicians are trying to do damage control and give a different spin to the NEP. They are aware of the concern over the NEP which was meant to achieve its objectives by the 1990s and which some now label the "Never Ending Policy."

They now insist the NEP is not about protectionism for the Malays but a policy to restructure society and combat poverty. In short, they are anxious to assuage the feelings of non-Muslims and avert a backlash in the general election.

Or as Khairy put it: "Some issues relating to the Malay Agenda will be discussed but in a different tone. It is not an anti-Malay agenda. It is not a free lunch for Malays and for non-Malays, it is not something that will rob them of their opportunities."

Umno Youth chief Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein Onn also appears to be to be trying to put behind him the politics of the *keris*.

He was guest of honour at a Cantonese opera gala this week, and he and wife dressed in festive red and mingled easily with the exotic-looking stars.

It remains to be seen if the PR effort will wash or whether, as the Chinese say, the wood has become a boat.

At a more local level, this is the time for aspiring Umno politicians to be noticed, to lobby and position themselves to be candi-



Fiery voices in Umno Youth: Khairy (right) is unlikely to be the hot issue this year but can Hishammuddin put the politics of the *keris* behind him in time for the general election?



dates in the general election.

Division heads are often first in line to be considered as candidates, and the more ambitious ones will do their best to get prominent Umno leaders to officiate at their meetings.

The purpose to this is two-fold: one, they are noticed by the VIP guest and two, it is a signal to the grassroots that they are well connected and not to be messed with when it comes to picking candidates in the general election.

"If they play it right, the division meeting may change their lives," said an Umno politician from Selangor.

As such, it is not difficult to understand the stir caused by Federal Territory Youth chief Datuk Norza Zakaria's slim volume on the Prime Minister titled *Continuing the Struggle: A Definition of Pak Lah*.

His rivals saw it as a brazen attempt to get onto Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's radar screen and have labelled it "*Risalah Bodoh Norza*" (Norza's idiotic pamphlet).

Norza, also a political secretary to the

Finance Minister II, felt the Prime Minister was still somewhat misunderstood. He wanted to explain that Abdullah was different from Dr Mahathir and to define the man and his politics, priorities and policies.

"But people asked me in the face whether I was trying to *bodek* (curry favour with) the Prime Minister. Neither did I run down Tun Mahathir. People haven't even read the book but have attacked me," he said.

Some in Umno did not like the tone used to describe Dr Mahathir's legacy. The elder statesman may be deemed politically incorrect but he is still acknowledged as a great Malay leader who brought progress to their lives, party and country.

The Federal Territory Youth chief has always been frank about the fact that he does not have a famous family name to ride on so he has to work doubly hard to be noticed.

His party website (www.pemudawilayah.org) is always up-to-date and although it carries a string of pictures of him doing things from giving aid to needy students to singing karaoke, he is a hard-working politician who speaks up on issues while others play it safe.

Last year, Johor set the Malay Agenda tone for the party.

This year, said Johor Umno Youth chief Razali Ibrahim, local issues such as the Iskandar Development Region project and crime incidents in Johor are likely to dominate.



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DATUK NORZA ZAKARIA

want to know more about it, its impact on our culture, values and environment," said Razali.

He said Johor politicians are still uneasy about the implications of the joint Cabinet committee involving Ministers and officials from both Malaysia and Singapore. They are not convinced that a project on their territory needs a committee that includes officials from another country.

But the real and unspoken fear among the Umno political body is how the sweeping change and population influx will affect the state's geopolitics and, ultimately, the so-called bastion of Umno.

According to the astute Ketereh MP Datuk Alwi Che Ahmad, this round of meetings will also find the next batch of Umno leaders positioning themselves.

"It will be interesting to see how the vice-presidents - the current and potential ones - conduct themselves," he said.

The grassroots are already talking about the next batch of vice-presidents who would have to include one or two persons of potential deputy prime minister material.

The flamboyant writer Syed Hussein Alattas or Pak Habib as he is known, is already working on a book about this.

When he met Alwi recently, the latter teasingly said the legendary RAHMAN formula on Malaysian prime ministers was about to run its course and it was time to begin the NAJIB formula, the assumption being that Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak would succeed Abdullah.

Pak Habib liked the idea but asked who A would be.

The joker in Alwi said: "Ali Rustam or, better still, Alwi."

Both had a good laugh and Pak Habib, by then caught up in the outlandish theory, said J would stand for JJ (Datuk Seri Jamaluddin Jarjis). But knowing his taste for kooky theories, he may even end up with J for KJ, that is, Khairy.

But jokes aside, everyone will be watching to see whether the *keris* will again be waved and kissed by Umno leaders.