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# Umno divided on ruling that seeks to unite

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Calls for scrapping the quota system for nominations for top Umno posts seem to be gaining favour with the party grassroots, writes ZUBAIDAH ABU BAKAR

ABOLISHING the rule requiring candidates for top Umno posts to first get a minimum number of nominations has become a hot topic lately.

One party leader after another has joined the bandwagon in favour of doing away with the 20-year-old rule. Still, at this stage, the number of party divisions coming out in the open to declare their stand is small, considering there are 191 of them.

While critics of the system argue that changes would open opportunities for capable people to step up as leaders, those in favour of retaining the ruling are concerned that changing it could weaken Umno, as contests are synonymous with factionalism and, hence, a threat to party unity.

More importantly, are Umno's 3.2 million members, still reeling from the party's worst ever performance in a general election that cost the Barisan Nasional its two-thirds parliamentary majority, confident that doing away with the system could heal wounded egos and see members rebuild the party hand in hand?

Or will it further weaken Umno and make it irrelevant to the Malays?

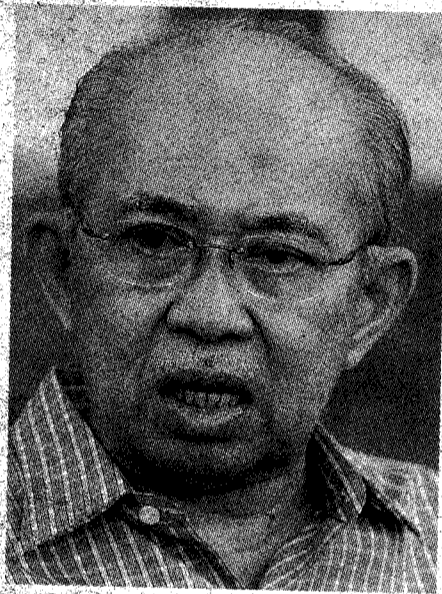
Analysts think members are being emotionally driven and bogged down in post-election trauma, and therefore are not thinking straight right now. Universiti Utara Malaysia dean of international studies Professor Dr Mohamed Mustafa Ishak said Umno members had to see things in perspective.

He noted that the party's history had seen Umno survive even bigger crises.

After all, the spirit behind the quota system is to ensure that only serious contenders are nominated for the top posts. It is to prevent opportunists from challenging incumbents and causing a major split and too much politicking among members.

Ironically, the loudest of voices demanding the abolition of the ruling are two seasoned politicians, who are themselves controversial. They were, in fact, instrumental in the ruling's introduction in 1987.

Former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and



Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah's Gua Musang division is holding its EGM today

former challenger for the top post Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah are now driving the mounting pressures for reform in the party.

The pressures are not confined to members taking stock of what caused the setback in the general election. Some are calling for party president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to take responsibility for Umno's disastrous performance and resign.

Tengku Razaleigh's Gua Musang division is holding its extraordinary general meeting (EGM) today to discuss Umno's performance and is likely to call for electoral reforms, including abolishing the quota system.

The Cheras division committee is meeting tonight to decide on the date for its EGM, which its division chief Datuk Syed Ali Al-Habshee said would be this month.

"We want the quota system abolished because the strength of party leaders, especially the president and deputy president, has not been tested," he said, distancing the division from Tengku Razaleigh's personal political struggle.

Sri Gading division chief Datuk Mohamed Aziz, while sharing the view that "things in Umno have to be corrected fast", including doing away with the quota system, said his



Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad introduced the quota system in 1987

division was waiting for a signal from Johor Umno to act. The state Umno liaison committee is scheduled to meet tomorrow and Mohamed believed the issue would be raised by some division leaders.

A similar mood is said to prevail among the state's other Umno divisions.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Associate Professor Mohammad Agus Yusoff, who agrees with critics of the quota system, said it was only fair for Umno to make contests for posts easier for democracy to remain alive in the party.

"It can also curb money politics involving aspirants who often resort to buying nominations," he said.

Umno introduced the quota regulation after Tengku Razaleigh challenged Dr Mahathir for the Umno presidency in 1987, precipitating a crisis that eventually saw Umno being declared illegal.

Under the party constitution, a candidate wishing to contest the president's post must obtain nominations from at least 30 per cent of the 191 divisions (58 nominations).

Challengers require 20 per cent (38) for the deputy president's post, 10 per cent (19) for an elected vice-president's post, and five per cent (10) for a seat on the supreme council.

Since then, the post of party

president has not been contested. Tengku Razaleigh did make an attempt to challenge Abdullah in 2004, but failed — he got only one nomination, from his Gua Musang division. Divisions that had earlier backed him did not keep their word, for reasons known only to them.

"Yes, I was the one who introduced this rule," Dr Mahathir admitted to some 2,000 people, including past and present Umno leaders, at a forum in Petaling Jaya on Tuesday, "but at that time, the divisions were not suppressed by the leadership."

The focus of the meeting was to analyse the March 8 election results, but it turned into a platform for calls demanding Abdullah's resignation, including from Dr Mahathir — who hand-picked Abdullah to succeed him in October 2003 — and his son Mukhriz, an Umno Youth exco member and newly elected member of parliament for Jerlun, Kedah.

The party leadership has so far not dismissed outright the idea of scrapping the quota system.

Deputy president Datuk Seri Najib Razak has given an assurance that the supreme council will study the effects of the system and the views of members on whether to review the ruling, as there are differing views on the matter.