

No longer a shoo-in for Khairy

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The political tsunami has levelled the playing field and it is going to be a wide-open race for the Umno Youth leadership.

JUST three weeks ago, they were waging a fierce election campaign and raining accusations on each other.

But on Thursday, all that seemed far behind them when the newly-elected and re-elected MPs turned up in Parliament for a briefing.

And this was perhaps best illustrated in a photograph of PKR's Member of Parliament for Batu Tjan Chua and Barisan Nasional's MP for Rembau Khairy Jamaluddin walking together in the Parliament lobby, wearing their best smiles.

Khairy has been keeping a rather low profile since the elections. He is aware of the mood out there about him and the pressure is not about to end just yet.

As such, the man who many assumed would inherit the Umno Youth chief's chair is now watching the action from the sidelines.

It is still a good eight months before the Umno elections but the race for the Umno Youth leadership has effectively begun.

Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein flagged off the race when he announced that he would not be defending his leadership of the wing.

It was hardly breaking news because Hishammuddin was known to be eyeing one of the three vice-president's posts since last year. Some even thought the announcement was Hishammuddin's way of diverting the attention of Umno Youth



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members from the party's post-election woes.

Whatever his reason, the contest for Umno Youth chief is going to be a wide-open race.

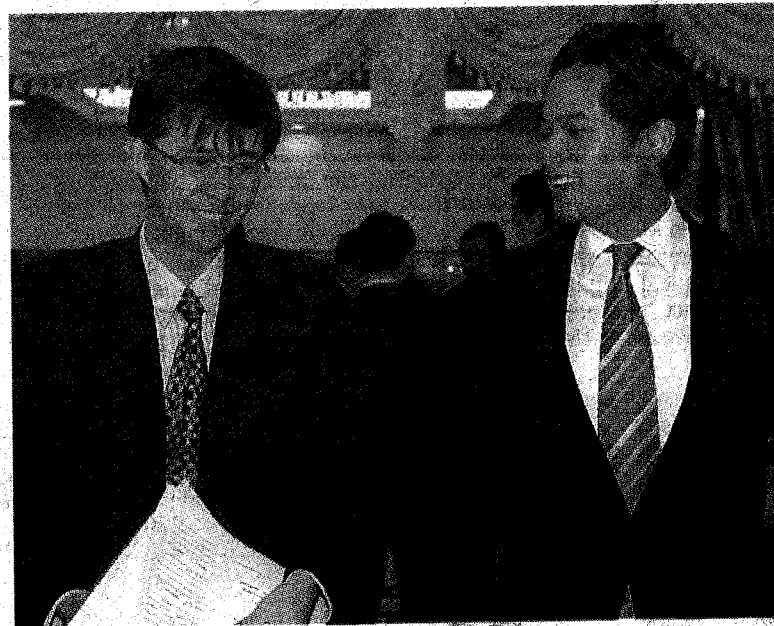
To date, Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir and Datuk Seri Dr Khir Toyo have confirmed they will be vying for the post.

"The political tsunami of March 8 has levelled the playing field. The fear factor is not there anymore and people are not afraid to challenge the status quo," said an Umno Youth politician.

To put it bluntly, few had been prepared to take on Khairy who was then the leading contender.

But Khairy has suffered considerable political damage from the elections and few see him going for the post for a number of reasons.

Firstly, his candidacy will cause resentment that may spill over to the Prime Minister and he would not want that. Secondly, public opinion is against him and Umno may have a harder time winning back the non-Malay middle ground with him as



Civil exchange: Tian Chua and Khairy, sharing a light moment as they arrive at Parliament House for briefing

the next Youth leader.

Besides, at only 33, he can afford to hold on to his No 2 post in the wing.

But, as an Umno strategist pointed out, three people had a part in the perfect storm during the elections.

One was, no doubt, Khairy and his controversial statements. The other was Hishammuddin who wielded the keris. Then there was Dr Khir whose state officers demolished the

Hindu temple.

"Together, they created the perfect storm," said the Umno strategist.

Even Mukhriz will have to prove that he can do more for the Youth wing than defend his father's causes.

But these are early days yet. The nominations for posts, including those for the Youth wing, will take place when division meetings start in October and that's when the

games really begin.

More candidates are likely to emerge in the meantime. The possibilities are lawyer Razali Ibrahim and chartered accountant Datuk Norza Zakaria, the Youth heads for Johor and Federal Territory respectively.

They have probably not jumped in yet because they do not have the sort of war chests that Mukhriz and Khir are reputed to have.

Razali may be the dark horse because he is closely allied to Hishammuddin who has reportedly asked him to consider going for the post.

It is not necessarily all over for Khairy because the Umno Youth heads of Perlis, Penang, Perak, Pahang and Terengganu have pledged their support if he goes for the No 1 post.

"He still has our support," said Perlis Umno Youth head Datuk Rozabil Abdul Rahman.

The catch is that state Youth heads are appointed by the Umno Youth chief and they do not always command the ground.

In fact, their actions have often been criticised as reflecting the interests of the leadership rather than the sentiments on the ground.

Meanwhile, Khairy is playing it cool.

He has neither confirmed nor dismissed his options but said he needs to listen to the grassroots' views before making a decision.