

Can win-ability save Umno?
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KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 24 — To their Umno and MCA patriarchs, Datuk Mad Aris Mad Yusof and Michael Tay are small fish. One is a former assemblyman while the other is only branch chief.

But their small significance in the party is in inverse to their public profiles. Mad Aris is a four-term, undefeated assemblyman of Chempaka, in Selangor. His last winning record was in 2004, where he got 6,055-more votes than the PAS candidate.

Tay, meanwhile, has fashioned a reputation for being the “Michael Chong” of Johor MCA. He appears almost every week in newspapers where he highlights cases that the cops, local councils and even “wakil rakyat” can’t resolve.

Despite storied service records in their communities, both have and could again be passed over as election candidates of their respective parties. But this could change if Umno president and Barisan Nasional chief Datuk Seri Najib Razak has his way.

Dr Mohd Khir said the next general election would see more scrutiny on the personalities of candidates. — File pic
Najib wants the BN parties to choose candidates based on their ability to win in an election. The approach sounds logical and simple enough but in actuality hits at the core of how BN parties function.

At least for the past 30 years, candidates have always been chosen among a party’s senior middle-ranking officers. Either the division, deputy or vice-chiefs or the leaders of their women or Youth wings.

The bigger factor

The doctrine of “win-ability” goes back to the debate as to whether a candidate or the party is a bigger factor in an election.

Does a candidate’s charisma and public profile win over voters with little help from his party or does a well-oiled machinery help put into office even the most colourless politician?

Numerous examples have backed both sides of the argument, from the 1988 Johor Baru by-election to the 2002 Ketari by-election.

An increasingly educated and discerning voter populace, BN leaders say, have balanced the effect of both factors.

“It used to be we could field a ‘songkok’ in some of our seats and we would still win,” jokes Datuk Seri Raja Ahmad Zainuddin Raja Omar from Perak Umno, of the dominance the BN’s machinery once had. “That’s just not possible anymore.”

The past 3½ years where Pakatan Rakyat has ruled four states and challenged BN's 50-year dominance in the federal administration and Parliament has also given voters a view into different styles of governance.

Sungai Panjang assemblyman Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Khir Toyo believes that because both coalitions, BN and PR, are very layman-centred in their strategies and service-oriented in policies, the distinguishing factor would be their candidates.

"We will see more scrutiny in the next election on the personalities of a candidate. Almost 60 per cent of voters will be youths (under 40), so we should choose younger candidates with leadership potential," says Dr Mohd Khir, a former Selangor menteri besar.

Breaking tradition

How "win-ability" is determined would likely be contentious, says Ramli Mohd Yunos a Kedah Umno division secretary.

"And if a candidate does not get the support of local Umno leaders, they will 'switch off' their machinery," says Ramli. In many previous elections, this often torpedoed a campaign.

Traditionally, win-ability was closely tied to party position at the division level. The practice used to be that a BN leader rose up the ranks through service to the community because, theoretically, the party serves the community.

It holds gotong-royong, helps get welfare aid for the needy, helps in disaster relief and channels complaints to the local authorities. In essence, party work is training for prospective "wakil rakyat".

So a leader moves up in the party in relation to his track record of service. And when he gets high enough, he is chosen as candidate.

As corruption spread in Umno, this method of scaling the hierarchy stopped and was replaced by patronage. Party elections became awash with money as division bosses were chosen based on how much they spent rather than how much they served.

Raja Ahmad Zainuddin cautions against side stepping division interests. — Picture by Choo Choy May

Eventually, those leaders became candidates by virtue of their relationship to a state or national leader.

And elections were won or lost depending on whether a certain division leader got the candidacy he wanted.

"Win-ability" is supposed to cut through this by insisting that division position is not a pre-requisite to getting fielded as a candidate.

An example, says Ramli of Kedah Umno, is the Klang Valley-based professional who is known nationally but who comes back to his kampung to be a candidate.

But Raja Ahmad Zainuddin of Perak cautions against side stepping division interests. A party's machinery, he says, makes a difference in terms of getting a candidate's name out to all the voters in his constituency.

“Especially, fence sitters, a party’s machinery can tilt them one way or the other,” says Raja Ahmad Zainuddin, who is also Kubu Gajah assemblyman.

He also argues that if candidates do not come from the party’s local leadership and do not work themselves up the ranks, there will be no loyalty.

“Wakil rakyat can then just change parties after winning because they do not have a connection to the party.” Win-able candidates then will still have to be paired with a party that will drive their campaigns.

If Najib succeeds in bypassing Umno’s warlords to get candidates who are calculated to appeal to today’s more educated voter, he could just return the shine to a party whose image has been stained by greed and self-interest.

After all, it is the real Malaysian electorate who will determine the future of BN and Umno, and not a division chief and his cronies.

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