

Picking winnable ones not that easy

New Straits Times

7 September 2012

By ZUBAIDAH ABU BAKAR

HEAVY BURDEN: BN chairman Najib has to walk a fine line in choosing the right election candidates to re-energise the ruling coalition

DATUK Seri Najib Razak's search for the right candidates to fly the Barisan Nasional flag at the fast-approaching general election is an unenviable task.

As if having to go through the long list of nominees, obtained from several sources, is not a burden heavy enough, the BN chief finds himself having to deal with individuals trying to influence his decision.

Incumbents, during formal and informal meetings, have also told him they are still winning bets, that their constituents still want them even though they have served as members of parliament and state assemblymen for the past two decades.

Age, they said, is not a factor.

Then there are the sacks of letters supporting certain candidacies, but also voices and whispers telling the premier the opposite.

The more extreme cases involve lobbying for the post of menteri besar or chief minister after the election.

The task of selecting candidates is certainly not a walk in the park. Within his own party, Umno, Najib will have to hunt for those acceptable to local leaders as well.

Initially, Umno headquarters requested all 191 party divisions to submit three nominees each for parliamentary and state constituencies. The divisions were later asked to submit four more names for each of these constituencies, an indication that the party's top leaders were not satisfied with the first list. This is on top of other lists submitted by the Umno wings and parties outside Umno.

In the case of Kedah, the state said to be one of Umno's most problematic, names of at least nine Kedah civil servants found their way to Najib.

Speculation of the administrators having political ambitions has made the rounds since the Kedah Civil Service Association was entrusted by the Prime Minister's Office to coordinate the "Kasih Sayang Perdana Menteri" project a year ago.

Various groups in BN have different interpretations of who is winnable and some claim to be in the dark as to how the leadership will go about picking the best candidates in the final line-up.

The general rule is that the candidate should not only be acceptable to a majority of voters in the constituency but also to the local party machinery.

Ideally, the candidate should come from the Umno division's hierarchy. But if the division has none, then the person could be anyone who fits the bill.

After all, it is not uncommon for a divisional leader to make way for a candidate from another division, although such cases can cause unrest.

In the 2008 general election, Umno candidates were for the most part defeated by opponents from Pas and Parti Keadilan Rakyat because of internal sabotage. These candidates had a hard time fighting the enemy within, allowing the lesser known and total strangers to win, some with slim margins.

Najib is aware he is walking a fine line and worries about appeasing not only Umno members but also those from BN component parties, and reconciling these with the expectations of an increasingly demanding electorate.

The risk of sabotage is always there. When aspirants fail to make it to the final list, he and his supporters will retaliate, as has happened in past elections.

Post-mortem studies of the 2008 election results showed that many Umno members did not vote for the party candidates, who obtained two million votes out of 5.7 million Malay votes in 2008. This means that one million Umno members either did not vote or voted for the opposition as the party has more than three million members.

A similar pattern of rejection was also seen among BN component parties.

In a fact-finding mission around the country a month after the 2008 election, Najib, then deputy prime minister, and members of the Umno management committee were told by many division chiefs of party members working against the Umno candidates.

Najib has taken note, and he and deputy party president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin have been talking to problematic divisions as well as leaders of BN component parties to avoid a repeat.

The concept of fielding winnable candidates is generally acceptable to all component parties. But problems arise when candidates who regard themselves as winnable are rejected by the BN leadership.

In choosing seats for the 13 BN component parties, Najib will consider candidates with the highest chance of winning to take on a better-prepared opposition front.

With this in mind, he has to replace some names submitted by component parties with his own choices.

MIC, for example, has been asked to resubmit its candidates' list. It was reported that candidates for only two seats -- Tapah and Hulu Selangor -- have been confirmed.

It is crucial for BN to depart from convention if it wants to regain its two-thirds majority in Parliament and win back Selangor, Penang and Kedah.

Ousting the Pas-led Kelantan government under the two-decade-old leadership of Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat and defending Perak will also pose challenges.

Component parties will have to think outside the box and be willing to swap or sacrifice seats in the spirit of BN power-sharing.

All should understand that BN parties can no longer nominate candidates the way they used to because of rising voter expectations and a more confident opposition alliance.

Copyright © 2012 The New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Berhad.

Source: <http://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columnist/picking-winnable-ones-not-that-easy-1.139013>