

Zahid Hamidi, staying tough for the Umno rumble
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By Jahabar Sadiq

NEWS ANALYSIS – The toughest man in Umno these days is vice-president Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi. Not just as a big biker astride his Harley-Davidson but also as the Home Minister who believes sedition laws should remain and not amended to pander to civil liberties activists.

The 60-year-old minister has good reasons to keep tough until the Umno elections is completed by end of this year. The party consensus is to stop contests for the top two posts but not for the three vice-presidents slots, where talk is there could be a contest with Kedah Menteri Besar Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir leading the pack of hopefuls.

"Don't expect Zahid to stop playing tough as it is inspiring to Umno members who don't see much leadership in the party now," a senior party official told The Malaysian Insider.

"And Zahid is telling the party that he is tougher than the rest and should remain at least vice-president if not anything higher with his hardline stance," he added.

The official noted that Zahid has been honing his tough-guy image since the Sulu incursion into Sabah last February, where he took charge as Defence Minister while the then Home Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein delayed any action to resolve the crisis.

Analysts pointed out that both Zahid and Hishammuddin are party vice-presidents with Sabah's Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal, and any challenge could risk their posts.

"Shafie has the Sabah vote, so it is up to who is seen stronger and tougher – Zahid or Hisham – to remain as vice-president if others challenge them," an analyst told The Malaysian Insider.

The need to keep his party post has pushed the always-smiling Zahid to take a hardline stance on several issues from dealing with street protests to keeping certain laws.

He has gone public to oppose Datuk Seri Najib Razak's announcement that the controversial sedition law is to be amended, saying that the Cabinet has yet to decide on the law that is used mainly against opposition politicians.

DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng has asked Najib to censure Zahid, saying the prime minister had pledged a year ago to replace the sedition law with the National Harmony Act to regulate relations between the three major races in Malaysia.

Najib, who is abroad, has not responded to Zahid's views on amendments to the colonial-era law.

But not many expect any action to be taken, pointing out Zahid was once Najib's political secretary in the 1980s before his first win in Election 1995 for the Bagan Datoh parliamentary seat.

"He is a long-time Najib ally, so this is just a storm in the tea-cup and a play for the Umno polls," an Umno official told The Malaysian Insider.

Until then, he added, Zahid will be the tough minister in motorcycle leathers and helmet revving the engine for show ahead of hitting the asphalt for a short ride.

"Like most Harley-Davidson bike owners, this show of force is just a weekend ride with the boys. It's impressive but only for leisure," the Umno official said. – July 8, 2013.

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