

Election 2013 hangover could upset Team Najib in Umno polls
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The big question after nomination closed yesterday is whether Umno president Datuk Seri Najib Razak's status quo team will pull through victoriously next month or will enough unhappiness on the ground over his electoral performance lead to delegates voting in the likes of Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir and others.

In fact, the forces aligned to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and others in party feel that status quo will mean a few more years of mediocrity and more failure at the next general election.

But the president has over the last few months crafted a script which envisaged the three incumbent vice-presidents, the youth chief and the Wanita chief being returned to office for another term.

All of them have Najib's backing and his blessing in the October party polls, five months after Umno gained eight more federal seats in the May 5 general election, but Barisan Nasional (BN) lost seven seats.

In return for his tacit support, all of them have over the last few months praised his leadership and have led the chorus calling for Najib and his deputy Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin not to be challenged in the party polls.

However, a slew of contenders throwing their hats in the ring might change the arrangement put in place by Najib and his team.

The three incumbent vice-presidents – Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein, Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal – who have formed a pact, are slugging it out with Kedah Menteri Besar Mukhriz Mahathir, former Negeri Sembilan menteri besar Tan Sri Mohd Isa Samad and ex-Malacca chief minister Datuk Seri Mohd Ali Rustam.

Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin Abu Bakar is in a five-cornered fight against Bendang Baru Langkawi branch chief Akramsyah Muammar Ubaidah Sanusi, Merbok division chief Karim Ali, Bukit Setiawangsa division youth chief Irwan Ambak and Pandan division's Syed Rosli Syed Harman Jamalullail.

His Wanita counterpart, Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, who was expected to breeze through despite being tainted by the National Feedlot Corporation scandal, is expected to have a tougher time now that she is up against Muadzam Shah assemblyperson and former deputy Human Resources Minister Datuk Maznah Mazlan. The lightweight Kulim Bandar Baru Wanita chief, lawyer Raihan Sulaiman Palestin, is not seen as much of a challenger.

"The status quo might be altered if the mood for change pushes through," International Islamic University Malaysia academic Datuk Seri Prof Dr Syed Arabi Idid told The Malaysian Insider.

He noted that though some of the incumbents like Shahrizat were popular, delegates looking for leadership renewal might thumb their nose at Najib's preferred line-up and opt for new blood like Mukhriz.

Najib has been trumpeting renewal and transformation in the party but he might not get what he wishes for if undercurrents among members take hold.

The grassroots has openly voiced a status quo for the top two posts but has remained neutral when it comes to other positions.

"There are strong undercurrents of members looking for change and wanting capable leaders who are able to give alternative views to Najib," said vocal Pulai MP Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed, the son of former Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat.

The fight for the three vice-presidential slots and supreme council seats will also determine the party's next leadership and its decision-making going into the next general election, say analysts.

But how much the Najib hints will affect party members thinking will be known in the next few days when campaigning gets underway in earnest.

Analysts say the incumbents have the upper hand but veteran leaders such as Ali, Isa and the young upstart Mukhriz have an advantage due to brand-name recognition.

"These men are popular and their supporters will go all out to prove a point," a political analyst told The Malaysian Insider on condition of anonymity.

"It will be an interesting fight, especially because Najib will have to work with all those who are voted in," he added. - September 22, 2013.

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