

In Umno Youth beauty parade, a battle between middle ground and far right
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It is the modern Malay dilemma. Should Umno Youth stick to the middle ground and vote for incumbent Khairy Jamaluddin as the wing leader on October 12 or choose among four others who believe they should return to a hardline stance?

Khairy has championed an inclusive agenda but the four challengers say the wing is now weak under his leadership and the grassroots are unhappy that Umno Youth's role as a pressure group has been usurped by right-wing Malay non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The four are 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.

Analysts said the quartet might seem to be lightweights but the five-cornered battle reflects the disgruntlement of a section of the grassroots over what they perceive as a lack of a firm stand in defending the Malay agenda against those who question it.

It is an open secret that conservative forces within Umno, especially those linked to influential former president Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, are resistant to change and have pushed for a more Malay-centric platform.

Many are also nostalgic for the days where the wing was a force to be reckoned with when led by firebrands such as Datuk Harun Idris and Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

"Although Khairy is a fair administrator, his detractors feel that he falls short compared to the past leaders in the wing's heydays where it was a well-known pressure group," UiTM Associate Professor Shaharuddin Badaruddin told The Malaysian Insider in Kuala Lumpur.

During the 2008 party polls, Khairy faced heavyweights – Dr Mahathir's son, Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir, and former Selangor menteri besar Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Khir Toyo – and emerged the winner.

The Oxford graduate's reformist and progressive image has made him popular with Malaysians, but some segments of the wing have wished for a more hardline stand.

Party colleague Lokman Adam defended the leadership style, saying that the wing prefers to engage the younger generation, to understand and solve their problems rather than be involved in rabble rousing.

Despite the challenge from the four, analysts say the son-in-law of former prime minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is expected to sail through this contest as his four opponents will split the anti-Khairy votes.

His appointment as the Youth and Sports Minister after the 13th general election is also seen as an advantage as it allows him to go around the country to touch base with youths, including his own members.

"Khairy stands a good chance to retain his post. He is popular as he connects with the young within and outside the party," Universiti Putra Malaysia political scientist Professor Jayum Jawan told The Malaysian

Insider.

Others say he has the power of incumbency with his challengers being largely unknowns, unlike those who ran in the 2008.

"Umno likes winners and Khairy is seen as one. The only way he can lose is if there is a push from the higher-ups to sideline him rather than because of what Umno Youth is now.

"Most of the Youth members know the reality that being inclusive will win them more support in the long run. And the opposite will just keep them losing votes," an Umno warlord told The Malaysian Insider.

"After all, the far right candidates like Datuk Ibrahim Ali and Datuk Zulkifli Noordin lost in GE13. That should be a clue to what the future is," he added. - September 23, 2013.

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