

Zahid, Shafie in the lead for Umno VP race, close tussle for third slot
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Going by the numbers crunched by their respective cornermen, Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal have locked up two of the three spots in the Umno vice-presidents' race, leaving everyone, from the other candidates to the pundits, guessing who will win the last slot.

The big fight now is between incumbent Datuk Seri Hishamuddin Hussein and newcomer Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir with Umno insiders giving the Kedah Mentri Besar the edge.

The other candidates in the six-man field are Felda chairman Tan Sri Isa Samad and former Malacca chief minister Datuk Seri Mohd Ali Rustam, the latter appearing to have a chance as well.

Party insiders say that if either Mukhriz or Ali get in, it will be a snub to Datuk Seri Najib Razak's call to maintain the status quo and will call into question the party president's strength in Umno.

Elections for the vice-presidents and 25 supreme council seats are on October 19, a week after this weekend's divisional and wings' polls in the 191 divisions in all states except Sarawak where Umno has no presence.

Former Umno Kelantan youth exco member Dr Zaiyadi Awang Noh said Zahid was a master strategist and had clearly won over the Umno grassroots with his tough talk.

"He knows how to play to the Umno gallery and his posturing in recent weeks has endeared him to the party faithful," Zaiyadi told The Malaysian Insider.

Attacks on Zahid over his "shoot first" policy and his threats to shut down newspapers have only moved him up higher in the party ranks, although there are also calls for him to be sacked for his callous statements.

"All these calls are from non-Umno members. Umno members themselves are delighted with him as they feel he is macho and fit to be a leader of a party championing Malay rights," said an aide to a former minister.

He noted that at last count Ahmad Zahid had received pledges from at least 135 divisions with Shafie trailing close with some 120 divisions.

Interestingly, Shafie has been picking up pledges in Peninsular Malaysia but has fared poorly in his home state of Sabah as many divisions there do not want to upset Chief Minister Datuk Musa Aman.

"But most divisions in Sabah will give Shafie the vote. He is the only Sabahan in the race," said an aide to Shafie who did not want to be named.

While the two are seen as a shoe-in, the challenge from Mukhriz has been seen as a big threat to Hishamuddin.

Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Wira Idris Haron, who is running for a supreme council seat, said Mukhriz was creating a stir as he is a novelty in the race and a fresh face.

"He is the new kid on the block. He brings a new style to the campaigning. It helps that his father is Dr Mahathir," said Idris, referring former Umno president Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Hishamuddin is mindful of the threat to his position and in recent days has been insisting that he was not a "soft touch", a point raised by his detractors for his failure as the previous home minister.

He drove home this point at a closed-door gathering of Selangor delegates in a hotel in Putrajaya yesterday.

"Hishammuddin has been explaining his time as the former home minister. He stressed that his lack of action on some matters did not mean he is weak.

"He is a matured politician and delegates are bound to take this into account," said a Shah Alam Umno member who attended the briefing.

About 146,000 delegates from 191 divisions nationwide will cast their votes in this electoral process, unlike previous polls when only 2,500 delegates voted – before Umno amended its constitution in October 2009. - October 11, 2013.

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