

Today's divisional vote offers sneak peek of Umno's leadership contest results, say analysts

Malaysian Insider

Oct 12 , 2013

BY THE MALAYSIAN INSIDER

As voting gets underway in Umno's 191 divisions today, analysts say the results will determine next week's tough fight for the three vice-presidential slots and the powerful supreme council that dictates party policy.

The fight to lead Umno divisions this time is keen, with 438 candidates running in 127 divisions to replace incumbents who lost in Election 2013, those not seeking re-election or because there is a rift in the ranks.

The line-up that emerges from today's divisional elections more or less provides Umno watchers answers to the most pertinent question: whether the nationalist party is indeed heading towards reforming itself, said Universiti Teknologi Mara Associate Prof Dr Shaharuddin Baharuddin to The Malaysian Insider.

"If the majority incumbent division chiefs stay, which is most likely to happen, then the Umno ground is not adapting to reforms that the party leadership had pledged to undergo since Najib took over the party's helm," he said, referring to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

"Should this happen, the same voting trend is likely to prevail in the supreme council line-up as the same delegates will be involved," he added.

His argument is based on the basis that the delegates tend to choose candidates holding government positions – ministers, deputy ministers, state executive councillors and heads of state agencies and firms.

Those being challenged include long-serving leaders like Tan Sri Shahrir Samad in Johor Baru, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah in Gua Musang and Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim in Arau, all of whom have been at their divisions' helm for the past 31, 41 and 19 years respectively.

Over 146,000 delegates from Umno's 20,000 branches will vote simultaneously to elect the divisional leaders today and they will go to the polling booth again on October 19 to choose the central leadership.

A party insider also explained that delegates will not replace an incumbent who is an MP or a minister with another without a governmental post as there is not much to be gained if they were to do so.

There is a lot to be gained in having a division chief who is an MP, while a minister as the leader has RM2 million in government allocation to spend per year, he added.

Pokok Sena division secretary Ramli Mohd Yunus was however doubtful that the delegates will make their own decisions in the selection of the central leadership.

He said it was an undeniable fact that the delegates were still dependent on division chiefs to "show" them who to vote in as vice-presidents and the supreme council.

"So despite the party allowing more delegates to be involved in the selection of leaders, it will still end up like before – they always follow what their division chiefs say.

"And naturally, the divisional leadership will be more comfortable having a leadership of their peer -- same school of thought, same wavelength," Ramli said.

In short, the composition of leaders at the divisions will be a sneak preview of the Umno leadership that will take the party into the 14th general election, say party insiders.

"The new set of leaders are the party's destiny, whether there is a change or not," one of them told The Malaysian Insider. – October 12, 2013.

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