

Power to the divisions

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Party solidarity and support for the leadership will be key words at the Umno division meetings taking place over the next few weeks, and these will set the tone for the party general assembly in November, writes JOCELINE TAN



MAJOR EVENT: Najib officiating at the opening of the Machang Umno division meeting last year. Umno's divisional AGMs may seem too mundane to even talk about but those in the game know that the division is where it all begins for the Umno politician. — STARpic by SAZUKI EMBONG

UMNO politician Datuk Ismail Sabri rarely does things in a half-hearted way.

Thus, when the Bera Umno division, of which Ismail is chairman, decided they would like Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak to officiate at the division's annual general meeting, he made a beeline to Najib's office.

That was as early as two months ago for he knew that to book a big name you have to beat others to the queue.

"I went personally with the invitation letter," said Ismail who is also Bera MP.

He also went armed with a persuasive argument — Bera in Pahang is one of those in the middle of nowhere places on the map but more than half of the constituency's populace are FELDA settlers.

Ismail knew that would strike a chord with the Deputy Prime Minister because FELDA schemes come under his portfolio.

Besides, FELDA settlers refer to Najib as "Menteri FELDA".

Ismail reckoned correctly.

Bera will be Najib's first stop in the string of about 20 divisions that he has committed to officiating over the coming weeks.

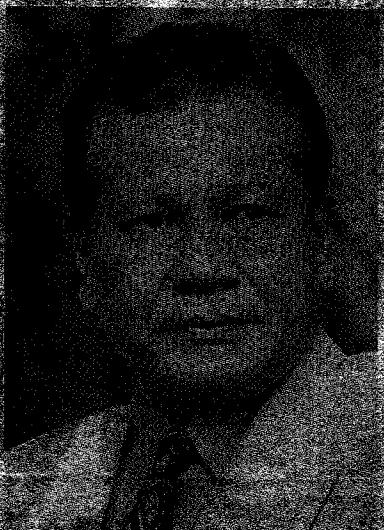
Umno's divisional AGMs may seem too mundane to even talk about but those in the game know that the division is where it all begins for the Umno politician.

The divisions are the power bases of Umno politics.

Any Umno politician who wishes to be taken seriously in the party needs to helm a division. The divisions also determine the leadership line-up in Umno every three years.

Altogether, there are 191 divisions and there will be four levels of meetings taking place, namely the main division, Wanita, Youth and Puteri. Before this, more than 1,000 branches had concluded their meetings.

Party president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi intends to remain above the fray, and he will only officiate at his own division, Kepala Batas.



Ghani: Chance to tell grassroots about projects earmarked for Johor



Zahid: Wants to explain motorbike ride without helmet



Khairy: Swamped with the most invitations

All division heads are adhering to the party decision that the list of VIP guests will comprise only supreme council members and Umno Cabinet ministers.

This year, the VIP guests are expected to use the occasion to explain "current issues" to the division members.

These will inevitably include the issue of the cancelled bridge project in Johor as well as the various allegations raised by former premier Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the last couple of months.

"The grassroots are interested in these issues and we'll explain according to the documents issued by the PM's Department. We have to explain it in the grassroots language," said supreme council member and Bagan Datoh MP Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

For Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Ghani Othman, this will also be an opportunity to tell the grassroots outside of Johor about the RM15bil worth of development that would be injected into southern Johor as announced by the Prime Minister earlier this week.

Ghani has been invited to open some seven divisions, all outside of

Johor.

"We also want to get feedback from the ground," he said.

The VIP invitees have also been asked to talk about the Ninth Malaysia Plan, a subject close to the Prime Minister's heart.

"The PM wants us to drive home the importance of the plan in the country's development," said Zahid who joked that he would also use the occasion to explain the controversy over his riding a superbike without a helmet recently.

The Deputy Information Minister and Malay rocker Ramli Sarip were criticised after pictures of them riding a superbike without helmets were published.

Zahid claimed they were riding in the square near the KL Tower in conjunction with the coming Merdeka celebrations.

The Middle-East conflict will feature prominently at the Youth level, which has led two major demonstrations against the Israeli aggressions against Lebanon.

The Lebanon crisis is expected to top the list of motions to be tabled at the Youth meetings.

Umno Youth deputy chief Khairy Jamaluddin will also be one of the

busiest politicians in Umno in the coming weeks.

His arm is still wrapped in a sling, and until recently he had looked as though he did not even have time for a haircut, but Khairy has been swamped by invitations to officiate at Youth division meetings.

He has committed to at least 30 meetings, the most among any Umno politician to date.

At his first appointment in Pengkalan Chepa, Kelantan, on Friday, he commanded the stage when he replied point-by-point to the many allegations that had been made against him, from the personal to the political.

He was in his element and he told reporters that he intended to use the division platform to defend himself in the weeks ahead.

It is not surprising that Khairy is much sought-after for the Youth level meetings. The 30-year-old rising star is energetic and not afraid to speak his mind.

"He has a bit of an image problem, but he is a good speaker and he is seen as the next Umno Youth leader. Many people want to see him and hear his views," said Selangor Umno Youth deputy chief Faisal Abdullah.

But while the urban-based areas will be keen to hear Umno leaders explain prevailing national issues, the rural populace is more concerned about bread-and-butter issues.

Kedah politician Guntor Tobeng who attended several branch AGMs prior to the start of the division AGMs was bombarded with a litany of woes arising from the fuel price rise.

The largely farm-based community in the rural outskirts of Alor Star complained to Guntor that the cost of fertiliser and pesticide had gone up by as much as 30%.

Even the lease of farm machinery for harvesting padi has gone up.

"People like farmers and fishermen don't really care about the bridge (in Johor) or the automotive policy. They are trying to cope with everyday problems," said Guntor.

Umno leaders, he said, would have to address these issues if they are going to rural divisions.

Then, there is what Umno politicians refer to as Malay Agenda concerns, issues the community feel passionately about — religion, Malay rights, education and culture.

People outside Umno tend to be rather unrealistic about the party, expecting it to grow more multiracial and multi-cultural.

But such quintessential Malay issues are the *raison d'être* for Umno just as the Islamic state will continue to form the basis for PAS politics.

They will continue to bind Umno members for many more years to come.

Underlying all these messages to be carried to the ground over the coming weeks will be the importance of party unity and support for the leadership.

Said Wanita executive secretary Datuk Faridah Abu Hassan: "The Wanita wing has a big role to play here. We have always been consistent and loyal, we don't play politics and we intend to bring our message of party unity and loyalty to our members."