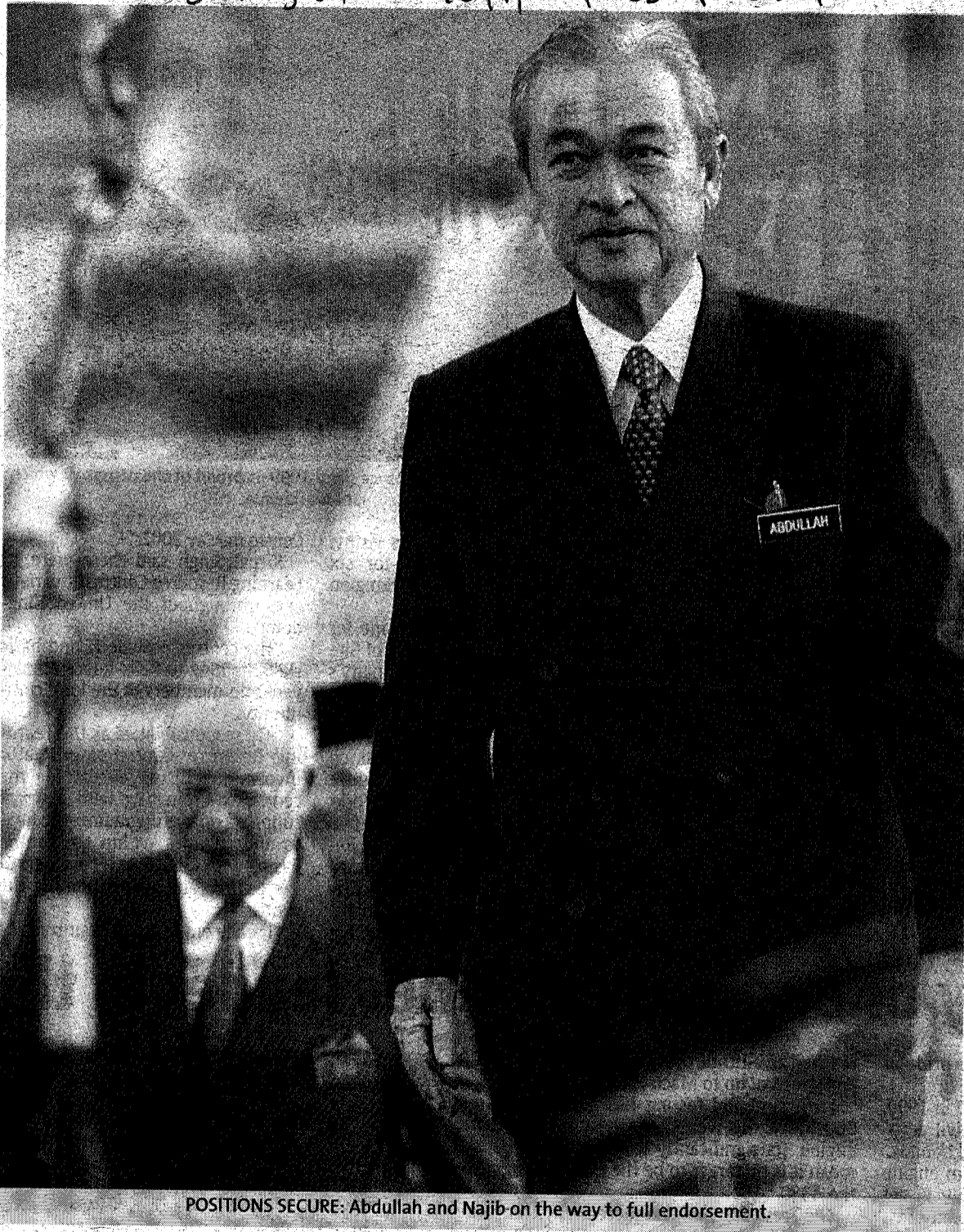


All eyes on Umno veeep race

Despite the distraction of sideshows, the contest to watch in this Umno election is still the bid for the three vice-president posts, writes JOCELINE TAN

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POSITIONS SECURE: Abdullah and Najib on the way to full endorsement.

FORMER Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Musa Hitam almost walked headlong into Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah at the funeral of a mutual acquaintance this week. Musa was about to leave after paying his respects to the deceased's family when Razaleigh walked in.

As they shook hands, the irrepressible Musa blurted out: "If they saw me like this in the old days, they would accuse us of colluding."

Razaleigh admitted that the treatment he had been getting was reminiscent of the old days.

"I told him very frankly, *berani buat, berani tanggung*," Musa later said to *The Star*.

The closest English equivalent to that would be "you make your bed, you lie on it," and Musa had the feel of a lumpy bed when he teamed up with Razaleigh for the Umno leadership in 1987.

But much water has passed under the bridge since then and he simply cannot understand why Razaleigh would want to take on Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi at this point in time.

"He has every right to offer himself but this isn't the time for a challenge - after the tremendous support Abdullah got from the people. He has contributed a lot in his time and I wish he would make a graceful exit," Musa said.

No one really believes Razaleigh, or Ku Li, will qualify to contest the top job. Razaleigh himself knows it and has said as much to those around him.

Yet the commotion over him has been quite unbelievable, as though he had already secured the 58 nominations needed to contest.

Whatever the side-shows that may have developed since the division meetings began a week ago, the contest for the vice-presidency is still the race to watch.

A pattern has begun to emerge in the VP contest: the forerunners comprise incumbents Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, and a surprisingly strong newcomer in Datuk Seri Mohd Ali Rustam.

Somewhere in the middle distance are Datuk Mustapa Mohamed and Tan Sri Mohd Isa Samad.

By last weekend, these top rankers had secured the 20 nominations they needed to contest.

The conventional wisdom is that nominations do not always reflect the final vote count. Still, one cannot be trailing too far behind if one wishes to be taken seriously by the time the delegates are ready to cast their ballots.

Agriculture Minister Muhyiddin is well on his way to being the top-seated VP, and he deserves it.

Most Umno politicians believe the main contenders for the other two slots will be Muhammad (former Selangor Menteri Besar), Mohd Ali (Malacca Chief Minister), Mustapa (Minister in the PM's Department) and Mohd Isa (Federal Territories Minister).

The first two are populist figures whom the average Umno member relates well to.

Muhammad (or Mat Taib) seems to be defying the perception that a VP has to be someone with a key post.

"The grassroots feel they can reach and touch him," said Ketereh MP Alwi Che Ahmad.

Mohd Ali's clout has partly to do with his being president of the 4B Youth movement, a vast network of Malays in their 20s and 30s who are his footmen on the ground.

As for Mustapa, he is seen as a serious-minded politician who came within a whisker of delivering Kelantan in the last general election.

Mohd Isa, it is said, cannot be discounted because he has his own hardcore following.

Still, one wonders whether those

making the nominations pause to ask themselves the fundamental question: Is the person being nominated fit to be the future deputy prime minister or even prime minister?

After all, the prime minister picks his deputy from the VP level.

Or do they nominate a candidate based on how likeable the person is or whether the person made a personal appeal and gesture?

If this question had not been asked at the nomination stage, then it should be uppermost in the minds of the 2,000-or-so delegates when they vote in this key echelon of their party leadership in September.

Those trailing in the VP nominations are not exactly disheartened.

"I'm quite hopeful. I know I'm the outsider and I like being known as a dark horse." Johor Baru MP and VP aspirant Datuk Shahrir Samad said in the lobby of Parliament where he has been much sought after by the media.

Mat Taib's statement to allow all the VP nominees to contest, regardless of whether they qualify, is unlikely to materialise but it went down well with the grassroots.

Some said he was addressing the prevailing grassroots sentiment because the nomination system, now in its fifth term, is not popular with the Umno ground. They feel it is not part of the party tradition and favours those with position and resources.

Attention has also begun to shift to the supreme council contest.

Last weekend swept in more than 70 nominees for the 25-seat body with more than half of them easily securing the minimum 10 nominations. The mentris besar have made a strong showing, with Datuk Seri Khir Toyo, Datuk Seri Tajol Rosli Ghazali and Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain taking an early lead.

It appears that the Umno ground has come to associate the mentris

besar with the supreme council.

For instance, Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Ghani Othman made it to the fifth spot in the supreme council in 1993 and the second spot in 1996 but did poorly when he went for a VP seat in 2000.

A government post carries weight for the supreme council race and the delegates who vote in the new leadership seem to know how to spread the seats evenly among the states.

These delegates (voters in a party election year) have acquired a rather unsavoury reputation over the years - from merely accepting incentives to demanding it.

But beneath that acquisitiveness is also a certain native wisdom about who should be in and who should be out.

Some said that this native wisdom was in play in Kubang Pasu recently when Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir was edged out of the division Youth lead-

ership by his opponent.

The Youth delegates knew and respected his father but many of them felt it was not right that someone who had not been involved in the division could just walk in and take the post. Others said that a certain state figure felt that Mukhriz ought to have consulted him before announcing his intention.

However, the division did nominate him for No. 2 post of the national Youth wing, which he had no interest in.

The supreme council list, said one Selangor politician, was filled with "too many old faces. There must be some degree of making way for new blood."

There are only a handful of first-timers with potential, among whom are Datuk Husni Hanadzlah, Datuk Azalina Othman Said, Datuk Dr Awang Adek Husin and Datuk Shaziman Abu Mansor.

The issue of renewal is fundamental in any election.

And if one is serious about renewal, the challenger has to be someone new, younger and whose thinking reflects the future.

It explains why long-timer Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman's attempt to take on her old nemesis Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz is not being taken very seriously and has revived jokes and stories about her from Umno members.

Likewise, Razaleigh's bid to challenge Abdullah.

"It does not reflect change and rejuvenation. It's more like settling old scores," said Pahang politician Sharkar Shamsuddin.

At the same time, it also underscores the fact that Rafidah has led the Wanita wing since 1984, with a break from 1996 to 2000.

Apart from the solid sweep by Abdullah and Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak for the two top posts, two other politicians have emerged as quite unassailable in the Umno stable of leaders.

Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein and deputy Wanita chief Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil seem to be progressing towards a clean sweep of nominations.

It is no mean feat and speaks volumes of their clout and acceptability among the grassroots.

"Hisham has earned his stripes. He has finally come into his own," said a former Perak Youth leader.

An aide of Hishammuddin added: "We've never been stronger. The Youth wing was in shambles when he took over. People were calling us names like *lembik* (soft) and *lesu* (listless)."

Hishammuddin's uncontested victory will also position him well for the bigger stage, namely the VP level, and there are people who see the Education Minister as a potential future prime minister.

As for Shahrizat, it is a signal that the ground feels she is ready to move up. She has demonstrated her ability in the way she has tackled issues connected to her ministry. The perception will be sealed if she wins a supreme council seat.

It is still a long way from now till September and everyone knows the real campaigning will only begin once the nominations are completed and confirmed. A campaign, however subtly done, can do wonders for one's standing.

And that is why people like Perak's Husni, bogged down by his duties as Deputy International Trade and Industry Minister, thinks he may be at a disadvantage.

"I can't campaign, I don't have resources and I don't know how to organise dinners without attracting attention. I'll have to leave it to God, I guess," he said in all seriousness.