

DATUK Hishammuddin Hussein was in Terengganu when told about the call by an Umno Youth division in Penang for the Chief Minister's post to be rotated among the Barisan Nasional partners.

The Umno Youth leader looked genuinely surprised.

"Is that so?" he asked reporters milling around him.

Hishammuddin paused for a moment, then said that he would be going to Penang and that he would find out more about the matter before commenting.

The Penang move, Hishammuddin's aides insisted, was apparently quite independent of any prompting from the national wing.

But it did not seem to be unplanned either.

In a domino-like effect, six other Youth divisions in Penang passed similar resolutions at their annual general meetings or AGMs the following week.

The controversial resolutions only came to a halt when the Prime Minister stepped in and put his foot down.

There would be no change in the policy, said Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

He said the Chief Minister's post would continue to be held by Gerakan.

"We will respect and abide by the PM's decision," said Penang Umno Youth chief Mohd Salim Abdul Bari.

Mohd Salim said the remaining Youth divisions will continue to push the issue but in a greatly modified form, namely by urging the state government to give priority to Malay concerns in economic issues, housing and education.

Still, the state Youth wing had made its point.

But is the Umno Youth move part of what is known as the Malay Agenda rhetoric that is so intrinsic to the annual rounds of division meetings or is it based on genuine concerns?

This is hardly the first time that Umno has aired its interest in the top post but the recent attempt was perhaps the most coordinated to date.

More so, it drew a strong reaction from the state government.

Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon was visibly upset when defending his administration's record.

He said his administration made decisions in the best interest of all communities under the Barisan Nasional concept of power sharing.

And as several other members of his administration pointed out, why point fingers only at the Chief Minister?

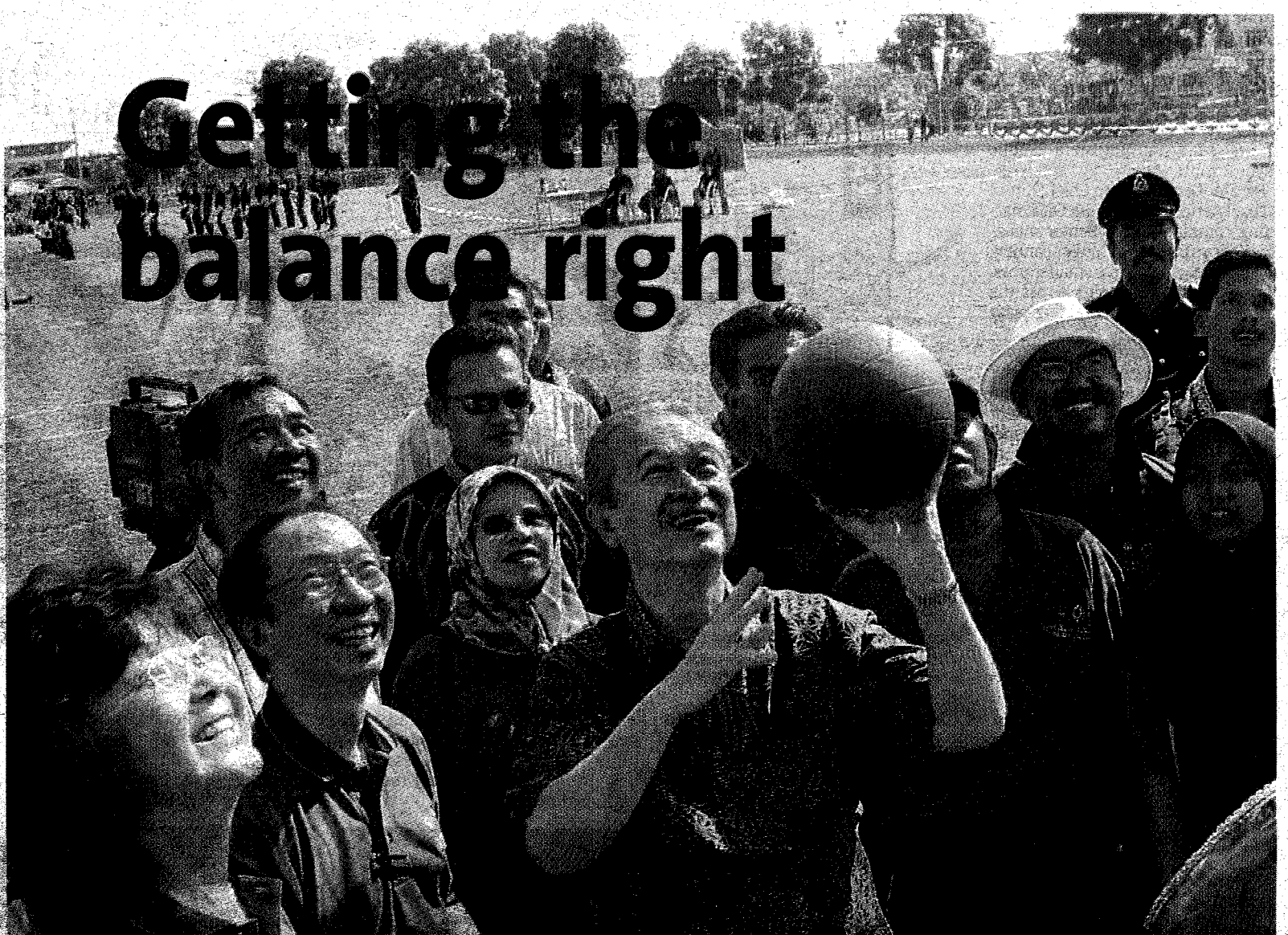
Decisions are made collectively at the state executive council level where there are four Umno members.

Besides, they asked, what about Bumiputra agencies like the Penang Regional Development Authority (Perda), Penang Bumiputra Foundation and the powerful Bumiputra Participation Steering Committee?

These bodies, they said, should also be accountable for the state of progress of Penang Malays.

Penang is the only state in the peninsula where the Malays are not in the majority and where the head of government is non-Malay.

As such the blame game tends to take on rather simplistic tones



ROTATING GAME: The Prime Minister put a stop to the Penang Umno Youth calls for the Chief Minister's post to be rotated among Barisan partners. — STARpic by ASRI ABDUL GHANI

although the problem is actually quite complex.

The Umno Youth discontent is based on three premises: housing, economic opportunities and education.

They feel that the Malays are lagging behind in these areas and according to deputy Umno Youth chief Shah Headan Ayoob, the state's heritage policy had "jammed up" more than RM500mil worth of property, including *tanah wakaf*, in the inner city area.

"We support Dr Koh and we want all seats in the state to stay within the Barisan, but he has to be more sensitive to Malay problems," said Shah Headan.

Said Penang-born economist Dr Nungsari Ahmad Radhi: "The Malays here are not badly off when compared to Malays elsewhere but people relate to their immediate situation. For instance, when I take the family out for buffet, we'd probably be the only Malays there."

"Penang is a very private-sector driven economy and it has produced some very competitive Malays. But the speed at which we should be running is very different, so people feel they cannot keep up."

The situation is most glaring in the area of property ownership.

"The Malays feel displaced or marginalised in the housing sector. The income level is simply not there for them to have access to the property market especially landed property on the island."

The solution, he said, lies in increasing the Malay entrepreneurial and professional class base.

"I've said this before and it's made me very unpopular but the Malays



Shah Headan: Concerned about changing geopolitics

have to work at it, put in more effort. We can't fault Dr Koh alone. You can have whatever leverage to get what you want but the effort still lies with you — education, networking, savings, capital accumulation."

The issue of property ownership is also connected to the more sensitive one of geopolitics.

Malays like Shah Headan complain about the shifting geopolitics of Malay domains like Balik Pulau where high-end development, which is beyond the reach of most Malays, is changing the population composition.

In that sense, the call to rotate the chief minister's post seems less about depriving Gerakan of it than using it as a platform to air their grouses and protect their turf.

Rotating the chief ministership had been tried and abandoned in Sabah. It was inefficient and gave



Mohd Salim: To abide by the Prime Minister's decision

rise to intense lobbying and politicking.

"I attended the Youth meeting in Bukit Bendera which also raised the issue. They're basically asking the Chief Minister to recognise their problems. If not addressed, it will lead to bigger problems," said Umno Youth secretary Datuk Rahman Dahlan.

But the curious thing is that both sides do not seem to have any concrete statistics to back up their respective arguments.

Mohd Salim admitted that the wing would be collecting data "to prove our case."

The Gerakan side could only provide collateral statistics — low unemployment, high per capita income and the lowest poverty rate in the country. Its strongest argument seemed to be that the agriculture sector was the fastest growing sec-

tor in the first quarter of this year and that since Malays dominate the sector, they were probably the main beneficiaries.

Both sides will have to try harder to prove their case.

Some think the Youth wing could also be sending a signal to Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Seri Abdul Rashid Abdullah.

After all, the first Youth division to table the rotation resolution had emanated from none other than the Youth AGM in Rashid's Nibong Tebal division.

Abdul Rashid is by most accounts a pleasant and approachable politician. But he is also said to be less than assertive and the fact that he lives in one of those gated communities is the subject of considerable talk among the local Umno circle. They feel that it does not suit a grassroots politician like him.

But Mohd Salim is anxious to dismiss any such assumption and felt compelled to reassure Abdul Rashid a few days ago.

"I phoned him to say he has our full support and that we are very united. I told him we did not blame him because he does not enjoy executive powers as Deputy Chief Minister," said Mohd Salim.

It is also possible that Umno Youth is stirring the ground because they see a transition in process now that Dr Koh is slated to become the next president of Gerakan and will quite possibly move to a federal post.

But as Dr Nungsari said, the grouses are valid and should not be ignored.

It looks like Dr Koh will have an interesting final term.