

02/09/1997

Umno now stronger in Kelantan and is set to be dominant force

Badrul Hisham Mahzan

UNLIKE previous party conventions, the two-day Kelantan Umno/Barisan Nasional convention held last week saw an unprecedented gathering of past and present Umno State leaders.

Their presence at the convention led observers to conclude that the once badly-mauled Kelantan Umno has rebounded and is ready to make a serious bid for power in the State.

The State Umno's strength was badly diluted in 1987 following a split in the party after Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah's unsuccessful bid for the Umno presidency.

When Tengku Razaleigh became the president of the opposition Parti Melayu Semangat 46 the following year, a significant number of Umno members in the State followed him, leaving the State Umno in disarray.

Already weakened by the defection of its members to S46, the State Umno found itself facing the combined strength of S46 and Pas in the 1990 general election. The party fared miserably and lost all State and Parliamentary seats in Kelantan that year.

The State Umno leadership was then taken over by party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who appointed Peringat Umno chief Datuk Annuar Musa as his deputy.

Together, the two leaders painstakingly restored the tattered image of Kelantan Umno and their hardwork paid off when influential members of S46 led by its former youth chief Datuk Ibrahim Ali defected to Umno.

Critics of Kelantan Umno who predicted its demise following the 1990 defeat were proven wrong when the BN managed to secure two parliamentary and seven State seats in the 1995 general election.

At the same time, relations between Pas and S46 deteriorated and later led to a permanent split. Tengku Razaleigh and his supporters dissolved S46 and joined Umno last year.

With the admission of former S46 members in Umno, the party regained its former strength and the number of seats in the State Assembly swelled from seven to 18 seats.

Kelantan Umno's first test (after the re-entry of ex-S46 members) was the Pulai Chondong by-election held early this year where BN lost the seat when its candidate Yusof Hamzah was defeated by Zulikfli Mamat of Pas by a slim majority of 118 votes.

Though BN lost, it gave Kelantan Umno a good indication of its strength.

To the party, the slim majority obtained by Pas showed that the strength of Kelantan Umno was almost restored and it would be only a matter of time before the party would once again become the leading political force in the State.

Another by-election was held on Aug 11 when Pas State Assemblyman for Semerak Sulaiman Ahmad passed away on July 6.

The BN nominated Umno Pasir Puteh division chief Kamaruddin Mohd Nor who captured the seat when he defeated Wan Fauzi Husain of Pas by 778 votes, humbling Pas in its stronghold. The Semerak victory indicated that the State Umno's strength has been fully restored.

But such strength alone is not enough to ensure Umno's ability to return to power in Kelantan. Party leaders knew that they had to come up with a concerted plan to win the hearts of the people.

It was at this convention where the leaders formulated the plan to bring about a change to the State.

The change is not just confined to giving a new facelift to the State through implementation of development projects when it comes to power, but the change also applies to Umno members themselves.

Umno members, including past and present leaders, are now bound to undertake a "political reformation" which could bring about a "positive political culture" in the party.

It has been pointed out on numerous occasions that the State Umno's own enemy is the internal bickering among members.

Hence, the reformation which is vital for Umno's future success in Kelantan should make the members more hardworking, disciplined and ready to serve the people regardless of the people's political affiliation.

In short, it calls on the members to be proactive, flexible and work as a team.

On the physical development side, the State Umno is hoping for the implementation of quality infrastructure in the event it gains power in Kelantan.

The main projects are the construction of new highways, upgrading of roads and providing better electricity and water supply.

Plans are also afoot to build a new airport or enlarge the present airport and establish a dry port.

Analysts agree that all this development, if carried out, will place the State at par with other States.

The question now is whether the people of Kelantan, like the voters in Semerak, are ready for a change and to give the BN the chance.

(END)