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Kelantan Umno looking to Razaleigh for extra push

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IF all had gone according to plan yesterday, Kelantan Umno strongman Datuk Annuar Musa would have woken up early this morning in Pos Brooke, an Orang Asli hamlet in a still unsullied corner of this north-eastern State.

Annuar's appointment with this far-flung settlement of about 600 a day earlier was to launch a solar system project.

"It's to generate electricity for the Orang Asli," says Md Alwi Che Ahmad, the articulate political secretary to Annuar.

The morning prior to the Pos Brooke appointment, his boss had made speaking stops at two State constituencies - Dabong and Pergau.

The weekend programme more or less kicked off what has been touted as the Kelantan Umno "roadshow" and which will lay the campaign ground for the next general election.

That the "roadshow" began in Gua Musang, the political heartland of the aristocrat-politician Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, was not lost on most Kelantan people.

It is an acknowledgement of Tengku Razaleigh's political clout and his royal status in a State where the palace is perceived as a king-maker in the political process. And it also demonstrates, once again, the shrewd politician Annuar is.

Tengku Razaleigh has been Member Parliament for Gua Musang since 1969, when the constituency was known as Ulu Kelantan and sprawled over three-quarters of the State (its size today is about two-thirds of Kelantan).

Thus, Tengku Razaleigh was an indispensable figure in Annuar's weekend programme, whether at Pos Brooke (the Orang Asli there regard him as their "royal protector") or the Ma'al Hijrah gathering in Gua Musang town on Sunday morning.

Ties between Tengku Razaleigh and Annuar - a one-time protege who forsook his mentor - has turned out much better than expected.

Both men have behaved with contained maturity. The elder man has been gracious and co-operative whereas the younger one has shown respect, even deference, for the former.

The former Finance Minister, it is said, does not hold grudges or, at least, he doesn't show it. Thus, since his return to Umno, a string of Umno leaders have met up with him - to re-establish old ties, to chit-chat, for discussions and to seek advice.

"He treats them all with courtesy," says his aide Ahmad Shabery Chik.

At the same time, Tengku Razaleigh's working relationship with Annuar is based on the premise that both of them take their orders from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is also Kelantan Umno chief.

The Kelantan prince, widely known as Ku Li, has been careful not to overstep his political prerogatives for Annuar, though No 2 in the State Umno hierarchy, is the man who actually runs the show.

What seems clear is that both men and their key supporters recognise their symbiotic uses for each other.

"We are organising the grand finale. In Kelantan, the coming general election is a big thing, like the Third World War," says Datuk Rozali Isohak.

The genial, friend-to-everybody Rozali is Barisan Nasional information head in Kelantan and the former State Parti Melayu Semangat 46 chief.

But this unswerving loyalist of Tengku Razaleigh also admits that the same sense of purpose and co-operation may not be as evenly spread on the

ground.

The reason: to date, only 40,000 of the 80,000 former S46 members who had joined Umno en bloc have found homes in Umno branches in the State. The rest, it seems, are members without branches.

"I always tell them sabar (be patient), things are improving," says Rozali.

A oft-heard lament is that branch or division leaders are not keen to absorb them because they fear the influx of such great numbers will upset the local power equation.

It was precisely for doing something like that the former head of the Kubang Kerian division was disallowed - by order of the supreme council - to defend his post.

Says Rozali: "In that sense, Dr Mahathir is sincere about our coming back. He has made it very clear that he doesn't like the attitude of some of the division heads."

But local Umno leaders are unapologetic about scrutinising new names even though the list was sent down from the party headquarters.

According to Kota Baru division treasurer Zahari Wahab, "some (of the names) were genuine, some were not".

The division, which formed a committee specifically for this, found that a number of names appeared to have been gleaned from the voter registration list and some even turned out to be staunch Pas supporters.

Eventually, the division verified and accepted 5,000 names from 13,000 on the list.

In the case of Pasir Mas, division head Datuk Ibrahim Ali quite adroitly avoided controversy by passing the decision-making to the headquarters which, after sieving through 10,000 names, verified 4,000.

Ibrahim then delegated the job of branch placement to two former S46 leaders in his division.

But there is unanimous agreement that the returnees should not expect cushy positions "just like that" nor could they expect to be welcomed like long-lost cousins.

Thus, it took Dr Mahathir's intervention to persuade Mohamad Saufi Deraman to step aside for Tengku Razaleigh in Gua Musang whereas in Jeli, an Assemblyman in the area was clearly rattled when a popular former S46 figure who got into the division's committee with the highest number of votes.

"All teething problems ... takes time for relations to truly warm up," says one-time Kelantan strongman Tan Sri Hussein Ahmad.

Quite naturally too, former S46 people feel that Tengku Razaleigh deserves a more prominent role apart from being head of the Gua Musang division.

For instance, one Kelantan man was amused when told by a local politician that a soon-to-be-set-up Multi-media Ministry would go to Tengku Razaleigh. He was even more amused when the politician eventually admitted hearing it from a former S46 politician.

But the incident does serve to show that supporters of his huge Kelantan personality wish a bigger and more formal role for him.

The feeling is confined not only to ex-S46 people for even Zahari admits: "He commands respect from the masses, Umno leaders and the palace. Already, he is a key figure in Umno. He can be a symbol of the new unity in Umno."

And while they agree that Annuar is hardworking and committed, he is no match for the political symbol that Pas has in their Tok Guru Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat.

Tengku Razaleigh, Zahari insists, is a more even match for Nik Aziz.

"Yes, they are more equal in terms of charisma," says Ibrahim.

It is clear that many Malays are drawn to Nik Aziz's aura of religiosity and humility. At the same time, they are just as intrigued by the combination of royalty, intellect and easy charm that makes up the person of Tengku Razaleigh.

And just as one should not belittle the Pas strength (which the party has been openly boasting about), one cannot underestimate the hold Tengku Razaleigh has over Kelantan people's sense of identity.

A senior journalist who was on the plane that flew Tengku Razaleigh from Kuala Lumpur to Kota Baru after being defeated by Tan Sri Musa Hitam for the No 2 post in Umno, was stunned to see thousands of Kelantan people on the tarmac, swarmed around the plane, waiting to see and touch their vanquished prince.

"It's a scene I'll never forget. That was the charisma of Tengku Razaleigh," he says.

Tengku Razaleigh has not lost that aura and can still command a crowd wherever he is scheduled to speak. But, says a Kelantan politician, special as Tengku Razaleigh may be, he is more "a sunset figure than part of sunrise".

The prince, on his part, is said to be quite serious about playing only the "gurkha" role in Umno, a pledge he made half-seriously shortly after returning to Umno.

Says Shabery: "So many people come and tell him, you should do this, get that. But he is not in a position to do that and he won't try to lobby for that kind of position."

He has told more than a few people that he prefers to "work on the ground".

Some think he would rather do without a position than end up with a post that does not measure up to the image his supporters have of him.

It explains why the coveted Menteri Besar's post has never been alluded to him. He is simply not interested in it although whoever aspires to the seat may have to win his good side.

The reason: he is influential with the palace and whoever hopes to be an effective Menteri Besar needs a good working relationship with the palace.

But post or no post, Kelantan Umno is looking to Tengku Razaleigh and his men for that extra push in the next general election.

They think they are within an ace of winning the State.

Umno lost marginally in a number of constituencies in the 1995 polls.

"The outcome this time depends largely on their (former S46) input. If the numbers they put forward are real, then the State is ours," says Ibrahim.

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