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Unease over possible Annuar-Zainal showdown

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SUGAR has been the preferred topic of conversation among the notoriously sweet-toothed Kelantan people since the start of the fasting month.

But in Peringat, the parliamentary constituency held by Kelantan's Umno strongman Datuk Annuar Musa, sugar has slid to second place as the topic of interest.

Locals there have their mind on something more engrossing: the potential political tussle for the top post in the Peringat Umno division.

Annuar, it seems, may be challenged by Melor Assemblyman Datuk Zainal Abidin Abdul Kadir and the big names involved have drawn intense interest and curiosity.

Annuar, after all, is Rural Development Minister and No 2 in the hierarchy of Kelantan Umno, after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who is Kelantan Umno chairman.

Zainal, on the other hand, is opposition chief whip in the Kelantan State Legislative Assembly, State Umno information chief and a member of the Umno supreme council.

Locals are billing it the contest of the two Datuks even though the former Pusat Islam director-general has yet to formally declare his intention.

But neither has he denied it.

"In any party, elections ... to have a change ... are quite normal," he says when contacted.

He was equally enigmatic when asked about the reason for the challenge: "If members want a change, then the move is correct."

Both Annuar and Zainal seem equally matched on the surface.

Both are highly educated (the former is trained as a town planner whereas the latter is an Al-Azhar graduate) and come from established families in the State. Zainal's father is none other than Abdul Kadir Sulaiman who set up the first religious school in Melor whereas Annuar's father is a well-known religious teacher.

But, personality-wise, they are as different as day and night. Annuar is suave, confident and assertive, and a superb orator.

His is a political style known as gedebai in Kelantanspeak, a mishmash of being bold and tough, yet cool and self-possessed.

Zainal, on the other hand, is seen as a moderate, outwardly reserved but affable and approachable in person. He is also known for his low-key style that is said to be compatible with the simple lifestyles that prevail here.

It is often said that he would have been the Barisan Nasional's choice for Menteri Besar had Pas not retained Kelantan in 1995. His supporters also like to bill him as the "hope" of a Barisan Nasional Kelantan.

Zainal's restraint over wanting to challenge Annuar is quite understandable.

First, no one wants to be seen as campaigning given the strict rules that now govern party elections.

Second, Umno, from the parent body to the Youth and Wanita wings, has been acutely conscious of its role in maintaining the political stability during these difficult economic times.

Thus contests, with all its unsettling effects, and especially between well-known personalities, are viewed with a certain degree of discomfit, even disapproval.

The second argument is now being used to the hilt by supporters of Annuar.

For instance, Annuar's political secretary Mohd Alwi Che Ahmad says talk of a challenge has put his boss in an awkward position as deputy State Umno liaison chairman.

"How can Datuk Annuar go around asking (Kelantan) members to be united, not to contest, if there is contest in his own division?" says Mohd Alwi.

Zainal, on his part, implies that the challenge is not mounted by him as much as by his supporters.

"It's up to the members. I'm obliged to abide by their wishes," he reasons.

Some say he is being used by those disgruntled with Annuar who it is said has probably stepped on more than a few toes in his gedebai way of handling issues and problems.

Annuar is viewed by this group as arrogant and controlling. Kelantan Umno, says this group, needs someone with a less pompous political style if the party hopes to win back the State from Pas.

Zainal himself is said to be dismayed by Annuar's handling of development projects. Rural politics is still very much about infrastructure and development, something which Annuar, as a Minister, has tremendous say over - or as his detractors claim, too much say over.

Others say Zainal had expected to be made deputy division chairman but Annuar had instead retained Ketereh Assemblyman Ariffin Mahmud in spite of him (Ariffin) being incapacitated by a stroke the last two years.

Annuar's people claim it takes a tough man like Annuar to keep Kelantan Umno in shape.

They allude to his efforts in pushing rural projects and particularly in helping the hardcore poor and how he has constantly emphasised the need for unity and co-operation.

They like to underscore this by pointing to the billboard Annuar installed in Peringat after the 1995 general election: Selamat Datang Ke Kelantan Dalam Sejahtera (Welcome to Kelantan in Peace).

Besides, the State party convention last September had passed a resolution discouraging contests at the division level in the name of keeping Umno united for the next general election.

But the strongest trump card against any such contest is probably the "Pas angle."

Mohd Alwi argues it this way: "If there is a fight, it will be a lose-lose situation. If Datuk Annuar loses, Pas will say: 'Even the top guy is not accepted.' And if Datuk Zainal loses, Pas will say: 'Look, you are the leader of the opposition but you are not wanted.'"

Mohd Alwi goes to defend Annuar's leadership: "BN came out of the 1990 elections with zero seats (in Kelantan). In 1995, we won nine seats. Today, we have 18 (State seats). How can they say things have not improved."

Thus, say Annuar supporters, the sensible thing for Zainal to do is to forget about contesting.

Zainal is reportedly not all that eager to take on Annuar. Even with his limited years in politics, he must surely know that Annuar is a shrewd survivor, a relentless fighter, a formidable opponent. One would need a lot of energy and resources to take him on.

But even though Zainal remains taciturn about his intentions the die, say on-lookers, is already cast. Even if he decides not to go for the top division post, the damage is already done.

Peringat Umno Youth, headed by Mohd Alwi, has openly aligned with Annuar while the Wanita wing, led by Zainal's elder sister, Uztaza Wan Faezah, is said to be aligned to Zainal.

More serious, Annuar will always be weary of Zainal from now on.

"I don't know whether there will be a contest but it's almost like an election mood in Peringat," says Senator Datuk Ibrahim Ali.

Contests for top posts are expected in several other divisions, including Gua Musang, but none have rivalled the attention seen in Peringat - probably because in no other divisions are the stakes as high as those in Peringat.

Locals have begun to speculate erratically on every incident and situation.

For instance, Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat's recent visit to Kelantan was read as a move on behalf of Zainal because "Tok Mat is close to Datuk Hussein Ahmad (of Rantau Panjang) who is not close to Datuk Annuar."

Likewise Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, former mentor to Annuar, accepted an invitation to open a meeting in Peringat shortly before Ramadan so that must mean "Annuar has the support of ex-Semangat '46 people".

But speculation and interest is most frenzied over the forthcoming Jan 26 working visit by Dr Mahathir to Kelantan in his capacity as Kelantan Umno chief and the fact that he will break the fast at Annuar's house.

Annuar, on his part, is not taking things lightly. The past weeks have seen him back in his kampung more often than usual.

There, after buka puasa and mahgrib prayers, he has been seen mingling with locals in the cool of the evening, wearing a simple baju melayu over a checked sarung with a cotton scarf thrown over his shoulders.

He takes every opportunity to remind people of Dr Mahathir's numerous calls for party unity and political stability. His supporters talk just as frequently about the Umno president's advice about settling disagreements by means other than contests.

Whether the challenge will actually go ahead remains to be seen but even neutral figures like BN information chief Datuk Rozali Isohak (former Parti Melayu Semangat 46 leader) are apprehensive about a contest between the two men. "The fight may drag on till the general election. That's what I'm afraid of."

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