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BN faces toughest battle in Kelantan

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KELANTAN, home of dikir barat and the wau, is the only opposition-controlled state in Malaysia, and an example that democracy is alive and well in the country.

The state is also said to be where Barisan Nasional (BN) faces its toughest battle in the November 29 general elections when it hopes to regain control.

Pas has governed Kelantan since 1990, following a decade under BN rule.

Pas also ruled the state between 1959 and 1978.

Prime Minister and BN chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad travelled to the state yesterday for a one-day working visit and had a closed-door meeting with the state BN election machinery.

The election campaign in Kelantan is centred on the state's development.

The BN claims Pas has failed to bring any beneficial development to the Kelantan people, while Pas insists that it has achieved a lot for the people.

"Kelantan's greatest asset is its people. They are hardworking, industrial, entrepreneurial, and go-getters. Unfortunately, the best people cannot thrive in Kelantan," says Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, Malaysia's Special Envoy to the United Nations.

Many Kelantanese migrate to other states in the Peninsula in search of greener pastures, said Kelantan-born Abdullah, who was twice elected Member of Parliament, for Machang in 1974 and Kok Lanang in 1986.

"I know a Kelantan girl, the grand-daughter of an Imam in Pasir Puteh. She went to Princeton and Harvard. She could never get a job in Kelantan with that degree. There is no place for her. Now she is working in Kuala Lumpur," he said.

Both BN and Pas have issued separate supplementary manifestos for the state.

The Pas manifesto outlines the party's achievements since taking over the state administration in 1990, which includes the introduction of the Syariah Penal Code (II) in 1993.

The code covers the controversial Hudud Law which the DAP, Pas' ally in the Opposition, strongly objects to. For non-Muslims, the manifesto guarantees the freedom to practise their own religion and culture.

Pas wants to implement a system of justice based on Islamic jurisprudence. It promises to continue to study, analyse, amend and adapt existing enactments in the state constitution to ensure they are in keeping with Islam principles.

The BN manifesto for Kelantan, meanwhile, pledges to overcome "all kinds of ills" plaguing the state, including poverty, unemployment, migration, high divorce rate, water shortage, low status of women, limited business opportunities, lack of low-cost housing, and primitive basic infrastructure.

The BN promises to provide balanced education at all levels and to equip schools with hostels, libraries, science laboratories, and other facilities, and send trained teachers there. There will also be a programme to provide 15 computers for each school.

Other salient points of the BN manifesto are the establishment of a university, expansion of information and communication technology, provision of adequate water supply for all, increasing business and employment opportunities, housing for the low income group and uplifting

the status of women.

Umno liaison committee chief Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah has also given an assurance that BN will rejuvenate the business sector to spur economic activities in Kelantan once the coalition forms the new state government. According to the Statistics Department's State Databank for 1998, Kelantan's GDP per capita in 1997 was RM2,081, the lowest of Malaysian states. The highest was Selangor's with RM8,623.

Of the total number of manufacturing establishments in Malaysia, meanwhile, only about 3.1 per cent are located in Kelantan, accounting for only 0.5 per cent of total gross output value for the manufacturing sector.

Kelantan has 97.9 hospital beds for every 100,000 population, against the national average of 197.9; and a telephone penetration rate of 7,046.1 residential subscribers per 100,000 population (Malaysia: 13,892.5). There were 404 primary schools and 115 secondary schools in Kelantan in 1996, with the number of students per teacher of 21.5 and 16.9, respectively.

"If BN wins in Kelantan, I am sure they will use all the Kelantan talents outside the state now to help develop it. It could become another Johor or Selangor," Abdullah said.

And yet, it is said that Pas remains popular, largely because most Kelantanese have become content with their lives. They have food on the table, shelter, and religious leadership under Pas.

But then, as the BN has pointed out, improving one's economy and standard of living is also required by Islam, and will make the Ummah stronger.

Therein lies the challenge for BN. There is very little doubt that BN can bring more development to the state, but the people will have to want it.