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Focusing on people's needs, aspirations instead of power

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THE crowd of Barisan Nasional faithful is building up in the high-ceilinged hall in Pulai, Johor, despite the driving rain outside.

On the stage, a troupe of pre-school children in colourful baju kurung are squealing away in a charmingly off-key version of Malaysia, Tanahair Ku.

An elaborate sign behind them welcomes Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman on his "Working Visit to the Pulai Parliamentary Constituency".

The visit is actually part of the MB's exhaustive on-the-ground rounds of Johor's State and parliamentary constituencies since August.

He covered all 40 State constituencies last month and Pulai - its MP is none other than Datuk Mohamed Rahmat or Tok Mat - is actually the second-last of the parliamentary areas Ghani has visited.

He has only one more to cover - his own in Ledang.

The BN election machinery is in full swing everywhere. BN component party flags are strung all over the hall (there is even a People's Progressive Party flag hanging tentatively in a far corner).

Packs of kuih and packet drinks are handed out and almost everyone is wearing eye-catching badges bearing the dual images of the Prime Minister and the MB - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is wearing the Kedah-style baju Melayu with the stiff collar and Ghani is, of course, in the round-necked baju Johor.

A municipal councillor from the MCA goes around handing out car stickers.

And Umno Youth chaps are everywhere in their smart vests - navy blue outfits printed with the ubiquitous dacing and the State crest embroidered on the back.

"So terrible the rain but still so many people," was Abdul Rashid Kasman's way of emphasising the upbeat mood. Apparently, Abdul Rashid, the swarthy and stocky Youth vice-chairman in Pulai, is often mistaken for the younger brother of Tok Mat but they are not related, he says.

The singing stops abruptly. The VIPs having concluded their closed-door briefing in the operations room next door, have come in and soon everybody starts singing the Umno anthem, then the BN song.

That's when I begin to realise that this is a serious political crowd - they actually know by heart the words to the BN song and from start to finish!

Briefings by the Assemblyman or MP, as the case may be, is a mandatory part of all these visits. And, as a few wakil rakyat have learnt the hard way, the briefings are no PR exercise. Ghani likes to ask questions and not PR-type of questions either.

A State Executive Council member told a Johor journalist that the type of questions the MB asked could only be answered by a wakil rakyat who is closely in touch with the ground. Those wakil rakyat used to glossing over things have come to realise that the MB wants facts, statistics, details, in-depth information.

During one such visit to a State constituency, Ghani was reportedly so unhappy with the wakil rakyat's state of preparation that, in a rare show of impatience, he flung the buku tatlimat or brief on the table.

But Pulai is, definitely, ready to go. Or as Tok Mat puts it, "Pulai is in third gear."

Ghani, as those who work with him will testify, is a hands-on MB who

puts in more than a full day's work and expects the same of those around him.

On that wet and downcast day in Pulai, Ghani sounds a little nasal, the result of a flu coming on.

"Morning work, afternoon work, at night work, so what do you expect?" says Onn Jabbar, his PA (development) who follows Ghani everywhere because he has to note and act on complaints and requests.

From Dewan Pulai, Ghani moves on to open a religious school in the same constituency where there is more singing although the nasyid singers here seem more practised.

This school is so popular that, according to a makcik, "there are not enough chairs", meaning places for enrolment.

It is close to 7pm by the time Ghani's deep grey Mercedes pulls away from the school and that, according to Onn, constitutes an early day.

Later that evening, a more relaxed Ghani admits he is actually very pleased with the feedback from all but a couple of his State and parliamentary constituency rounds.

In a way, Ghani's ground rounds have been as much an assessment of the State's election machinery as of his administration.

Ghani came in as MB in 1995, when the national economy and particularly that of Johor, was going at a gallop. Yet, amid this state of plenty were rumblings that Johor's growth had been at the expense of the people's quality of life; material growth had benefited many but had also left others feeling alienated.

Ghani read the signals immediately and went at the issues in his typical methodological way: listening, gathering feedback, assessing, formulating.

The outcome is what has come to be known as the overall goal of "balanced and holistic development", an idea that has since permeated so well that even the ordinary kampung folk are able to explain the policy as "material things are important, but so is religion, family and good health".

The idea of balancing economic imperatives with social and cultural aspirations is neither new nor original, but the point is that not as many politicians have been as prepared to push it with such vigour or commitment. There are, to date, 60 such programmes covering areas like environment, education, religion, culture and arts, sports, family values, food production, low-cost housing, healthy living, and so on.

Implicit in all these programmes are notions of volunteerism, cultural identity and resilience, ingredients necessary for society to move forward.

Says Johor Baru Umno head Datuk Shahrir Samad: "I think what Ghani has done is to give meaning to politics beyond big business and big development schemes. His first big project was building low-cost homes ... projects at the kampung level are not glamorous or headline-grabbing but they matter to ordinary people."

Unsurprisingly, the business sector says he is not doing more for them. NST Johor bureau chief Ravi Nambiar wrote a news analysis once commenting that Ghani was not pro-business enough.

"He took it very well. He said frankly that he had been concentrating on the ground, that it was necessary. But he said he also intended to focus on business," Ravi recalls.

His emphasis on transparency and openness is probably something that people are still adjusting to.

Apparently the NST in Johor had approached him some time ago with the idea of publishing a supplement issue for the general election. It was a straightforward proposal but Ghani decided to put it to his State Executive Council.

"He's like that, always seeking consensus. It's good for the people but business people get impatient," says Ravi.

Some business figures close to the former MB were also unhappy when Ghani recalled the letters of exclusivity signed earlier under Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin. He was concerned with the way State land had been given to third parties to develop in deals that clearly did not benefit the State or its people.

So he set up Kumpulan Prasarana Rakyat Johor, a State-owned infrastructure company which invites tenders from companies to upgrade rural roads, build and renovate mosques and surau, and set up libraries.

Ghani's premise for the rural thrust: "Meeting the expectations of the rural community was an important promise made by the BN in 1995 and I take it seriously."

A great deal of Ghani's concern, it is said, has also been maintaining a credible image after the controversy connected to his predecessor. That was probably another part of him that the business community had trouble adjusting to.

He recalls how, in his first year, he had people coming to see him with "all kinds of suggestions".

An example: the son-in-law of a Malaysian tycoon had called on him to convey the tycoon's best wishes but in the course of the visit, he casually asked whether Ghani might be interested in a 10 per cent stake in an industrial scheme. A few months later, the same son-in-law came with the message that the tycoon was thinking of opening a RM1 million account in Ghani's name.

"That was my first few months ... it was amazing what they thought of my office. But I am not rude, I don't tell them off and, definitely, I don't say yes. But the message has gone out that I tak layan this sort of things and they've stopped trying."

By now too, everyone knows the MB does not have businessmen hanging around his house.

"His office is open for appointments if they have any business to discuss. Initially, they thought he was unfriendly. But they are used to it now and the rakyat like it," says State Exco member Dr Chua Soi Lek.

The Anwar issue has had minimal impact in Johor. Among Umno people, the popular explanation is that the party comes first. Umno leaders come and go and they have included top personalities like Datuk Onn Jaafar, Tun Hussein Onn and Tan Sri Musa Hitam. So why should Umno crumble because of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, they say.

And although there is sympathy for what Anwar is going through, the other widely - and more uniquely Malay - articulation is: Kita bertanggungjawab setiap yang kita lakukan. Tuhan maha mengetahui, apa yang terjadi kepada seseorang itu adalah ditentukan oleh Allah.

It is somewhat fatalistic but basically it attributes whatever good or bad that befalls a person to his own doing and to the all-knowing hand of God.

That the party has held together so well here is also largely due to the sense of identity that Johor Malays have about themselves.

Johor Malays are acutely conscious of their State's role in the formation of Umno. There is also a distinct sense of tradition, even of civilisation, in the way they perceive themselves, their politics, their future.

Or a "collective wisdom" as Ghani puts it.

But around June this year, Ghani began a series of meetings with groups of Malay community leaders - village committee heads, penghulu, imam. He felt the need for a systematic explanation of the political situation in the face of what the grassroots were getting in the Internet, Harakah and

opposition ceramah.

His approach was simple. He would start each meeting, saying he was aware they were hearing things from different sources, so they could consider what he told them as one of the sources and it was up to them to decide which set of information they wished to accept.

Then he would proceed to relate to them his own experiences with the political machinery of Anwar. He thinks these sessions have gone down well because he was not talking about other people's experiences with Anwar but his very own.

Shahrir suggests Ghani is "one of the strongest MBs in Johor".

"In the shortest time, he has had about the strongest support. He has held Johor together."

Ghani's sense of priorities, administrative drive, political style and personality, it must be added, have not been of the conventional sort that Johor people, particularly Umno people, are used to.

His policies have been people-oriented, but he has not tried to play the populist. Instead, he has tried to rationalise politics, to make it a little more objective, to open up the processes, to equate it with needs and aspirations rather than influence and power.

In other words, he has tried to bring it out of its old groove. Some welcome that, others do not. But it's about time other politicians started doing the same.

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