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Journeying into Pas heartland

PENKALAN Chepa is Pas country. Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat lives here, not far from the banks of the Sungai Melaka in Kampung Sungai Melaka.

The house is now surrounded by a rather modern complex of buildings - a mosque, a multi-storied residential religious school and a large hall, all painted a pale green.

Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah's convoy of cars sped by the village through the steady drizzle, blue-and-white Barisan Nasional flags fluttering from the roofs of the cars.

Roads all over Kota baru have been turned into a war of green versus blue, but here in Pengkalan Chepa, the greens out-number the blues.

It is only a little after two in the afternoon but the day has turned as grey as dusk, for November is the prelude to the monsoons. The promise of floods is everywhere - in the swollen rivers and the small lakes that have formed around low-lying houses.

Tengku Razaleigh had planned on making spot stops around Peringat that morning but he had barely covered Melor - one of the State constituencies in Peringat - when it began pouring cats and dogs.

The rain had eased off somewhat by afternoon and the Kelantan Umno chief was now headed for Panchor, one of three State constituencies in Pengkalan Chepa.

Tengku Razaleigh is casually, but neatly, attired - a loose blue and white checked shirt, dark trousers and polished leather shoes. He is 62, but has the walk of one much younger - brisk and upright.

The convoy stops at Kampung Pasir Kasar, turning the otherwise sleeping hollow into a hive of sound and people.

This is a farming community and the faces in the crowd are tanned and weather-beaten. An elderly man in a brown coat, his face wrinkled in deep grooves, was wearing an Alliance badge that he had somehow kept in mint condition! Definitely not a party-hopper, this one.

The villagers here use the most economical abbreviation for Tengku Razaleigh I have heard - they refer to him simply as "Ku" (for Tengku).

The BN post in Pasir Kasar was plastered with hundreds of dacing stickers. With only nine days to campaign, this was not the time for winding speeches and Tengku Razaleigh's speech was brief, taking a by now familiar line - Malay unity, Pas has accomplished nothing in 10 years, and choosing a government which can deliver.

Politics and the weather are somewhat tied up at the moment and he joked that "the moon is good in clear weather but it has not been seen for a while now with the cloudy skies."

Then, somewhat cheekily, he added: "The rain is good. Pas people have to stay at home and watch TV and the TV is full of propaganda." This was a BN crowd but they had a hearty laugh anyway.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad may be Pas' favourite villian but he is very much Kelantan BN's rallying asset and his posters are everywhere. But the people in Tengku Razaleigh's entourage wear big, pin-on badges of Tengku Razaleigh.

The next stop is the house of Cikgu Yusof Deris, formerly the local Semangat 46 strongman and now the Umno strongman. He is thrilled with Tengku Razaleigh's visit.

A mansion-style house being built on the plot adjacent to his house is

the talk of the village.

"It belongs to a MPKB (Kota Baru Municipal Council) staff," one of local men said with a meaningful look.

Inside the house, everyone sits in a circle on the floor. This time, there are short speeches from the BN candidates.

The parliamentary candidate, a former university lecturer, Mohd Noor Deris, is considered a coup of sorts for Umno. He was a former Pas Dewan Ulama member but left Pas six months ago and joined Umno last month.

The rains have put a halt to the string of nightly ceramah that have become part of cultural life here the last year and both sides have had to adjust their campaigning styles.

Pas still comes alive after mahgrib prayers but now restricts itself to indoor ceramah and dialogues of about 100 people at private homes, suraus and madrasahs.

But Tengku Razaleigh, as the State Umno chief, intends to go round all 14 constituencies this week - short stops at strategic spots and houses of local community leaders who are influential and respected in their kampung be it politically or simply as a village elder.

And the consummate politician in him shows in his deft touch of the symbolic gesture. His choice of Peringat as his first parliamentary round was exactly one such gesture, aimed particularly at Umno Peringat strongman and Rural Development Minister Datuk Anuar Musa. It was basically his way of acknowledging the role and status of Anuar, his protege until the 1987 split in Umno.

The strategic value of "giving face" is still an under-comprehended concept among non-Chinese. But Tengku Razaleigh understands it well. One of his priorities since being appointed to head Kelantan Umno has been making sure that none of the existing figures of influence feel slighted or threatened by his elevation.

For instance, when Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi visited Gua Musang several weeks ago for a rural development function, Tengku Razaleigh had tactfully allowed Anuar to take centre stage beside Pak Lah since the programme was connected to Anuar's Rural Development Ministry.

Hence, his visit to Panchor that afternoon was seen as a conciliatory gesture towards the Panchor candidate Ariffin Hamid, a tough-looking man who is closely aligned to Anuar. And Ariffin was said to be touched by Tengku Razaleigh's presence.

The message sent out is unmistakable: what's past is past, this is a time for working together.

Umno people in Kelantan like to joke that it takes a few days for people to get over the shock of being picked or dropped as a candidate. Thus, when we passed a man standing rather dazed by the roadside, someone joked that he must be one of those not picked, inviting roars of laughter.

The entourage that afternoon kept growing. By the time it pulled out of Panchor, there were close to 20 cars.

There was a brief stop at Wakaf Zain, where within minutes a sizeable crowd had swarmed around Tengku Razaleigh. Those at the back could hardly hear him - Tengku Razaleigh is an emphatic and witty speaker but without a microphone system, he is actually rather soft-spoken, rarely raising his voice.

As an Umno politician once said: "He is a prince. He doesn't have to speak loudly ... people will still strain to hear what he has to say."

But there was little doubt that word that "Tengku datang waktu hujan," and the few sentences he spoke would be known throughout the kampung by evening. The power of word of mouth among the rural folk cannot be underestimated.

Soon the cars were speeding back to Kota Baru town, passing the Parti

Keadilan Nasional headquarters. The powder blue and white Keadilan flags are quite apparent although only four of its candidates are being fielded here. But generally, there are few reminders in these parts of the existence of the Alternative Front.

Almost overnight, hundreds of "posts" have sprung up all over. These are little huts or buildings which are multi-purpose confluences for party workers. They may meet there before they disperse out to campaign, or the men may come there to lepak and talk politics in the evenings. Every post also looks after a certain number of households whom they guard jealously against the other side.

The rain was pelting down rather heavily by the time Tengku Razaleigh's entourage arrived at Bunut Payong to call upon an elderly man known as Haji Omar, who had not been too well. "Dia orang lama," one of those in the entourage explained of the visit.

Tengku Razaleigh pops into several other houses. By then, it is close to 6.30pm, pouring heavily and time for a pause.

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