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Razaleigh (News Analysis)

KELANTAN POLITICS GETS A SURPRISE WITH RAZALEIGH'S APPOINTMENT

By: Ali Mamat

KUALA LUMPUR, June 21 (Bernama) -- In preparing to face the might of the ruling PAS in the general election that is drawing nearer, nothing is more gratifying for Kelantan Umno than news of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah's appointment as the state Umno chief.

The announcement on the appointment was made by Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the end of the Kelantan Umno Liaison Committee meeting at the residence of Second Finance Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed here last night. Dr Mahathir himself was the chairman of the committee with Rural Development Minister Datuk Annuar Musa as his deputy.

Apart from viewing the appointment as the "surprise" promised by Dr Mahathir a few days before the Umno general assembly, most Umno members and supporters also regarded it as the dawn of a new era for Kelantan Umno.

"After almost a decade of uncertainty, Kelantan Umno has finally found the most efficacious remedy to the various ills it suffered during that period," said a delegate from the Kota Baharu division.

"With Tengku Razaleigh back at the helm of the state Umno, our chances of wresting back the reins of power in Kelantan from PAS look increasingly brighter," said the delegate, one of many preparing to return home after the end of the general assembly.

Such sentiment reflects the mounting hopes the majority of Kelantan Umno members have all along placed on Tengku Razaleigh, the Gua Musang MP and a former finance minister.

To them the appointment was the best move to inject a new lease of life into their struggle and boost their spirits, as well as mend any rift that might exist between Umno leaders in the state.

Kelantan Umno's dilemma began when Tengku Razaleigh formed and led Parti Melayu Semangat 46 (S46) after Umno was deregistered in 1987. He did not immediately return to Umno after the party was revived, and instead chose to work together with PAS and a few other opposition parties through the Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (Angkatan) pact in the 1990 general election.

As if to show there was something special in Tengku Razaleigh, his party's cooperation with PAS inflicted the most crushing defeat on Umno in its history when all its candidates in the 39 state and 14 parliamentary seats in Kelantan were beaten.

However, Angkatan's strength began eroding in the 1995 general election when cracks emerged in the tie-up between S46 and PAS. At that time, the Umno-led BN won seven state and two parliamentary seats, while Angkatan took 36 state seats

-- 24 by PAS and 12 by S46 -- and 12 parliamentary seats which were equally split between PAS and S46.

When S46 was dissolved in 1996, Tengku Razaleigh and thousands of his supporters, including state assemblymen and Members of Parliament, returned to the Umno fold.

Observers of Kelantan politics felt that the "killer blow" suffered by the BN in 1990 and its failure to topple Angkatan in 1995 were caused not only by PAS' strength and Tengku Razaleigh's solid influence but also the "Istana" (palace) factor and split among Umno members and leaders in the state.

Sources close to Istana Kelantan said incidents like attempts to instal new Sultans at the height of the constitutional crisis in connection with

rulers' immunity in 1993 had badly hurt the feelings of the present Sultan to the extent that it was difficult for him to forgive Umno leaders behind the moves.

"The Istana influence cannot be ignored in a Kelantan society which still holds fast to customs and culture. When the Sultan's feelings are hurt, the people also feel insulted so much so that it is difficult for them to make Umno or any other party that does not respect the institution of rulers as their party of shelter," a source said.

It is in this context that many people feel Tengku Razaleigh's presence as the new Kelantan Umno chief will bring immense benefits to Umno because "an Umno close to the Istana means an Umno accepted by the people".

A corporate figure who is also a Kelantan politician said although the Sultan himself was free from any political influence, the emergence of Tengku Razaleigh as the state Umno head would be viewed by the Kelantan people as a development that would bring Umno closer to His Highness.

This is because Tengku Razaleigh himself is a Kelantan royal family member, and is in fact an uncle of the present Sultanah of Kelantan.

Apart from this, the corporate leader said it was no longer a secret that one cause of Kelantan Umno's weakness was the existence of several groups within the party which had their own agendas.

"From our observation, apart from Tengku Razaleigh no other local leaders can bring down the wall dividing one group from the other," he said.

Apart from his vast political experience, Tengku Razaleigh also possesses a special quality not found among other Kelantan Umno leaders.

"Because of his stature at the national and international levels, all guidance, advice and comments made by Tengku Razaleigh will definitely be respected by all levels of the Kelantan Umno leadership," said a delegate who was an MP when Tengku Razaleigh headed the state Umno sometime ago.

Tengku Razaleigh was the Kelantan Umno chief from 1972 until the post was taken over by former Menteri Besar Tan Sri Mohamed Yaacob in 1984.

Tengku Razaleigh's involvement in Umno is a record of sorts in the Kelantan context. He joined the party and was elected the MP for Hulu Kelantan in 1962 at the age of 25, and elected Umno Supreme Council member a year later.

Tengku Razaleigh was also Umno vice-president for 14 years until 1987.

-- BERNAMA

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