

04/07/1999

Opposition coalition yet to get down to brass tacks

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DATUK Rozali Isohak's telephone in his Kota Baru home rings almost non-stop these days or, to be specific, ever since Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah was appointed Kelantan Umno chief more than a week ago.

"Everyone wants to see `Ku Li' (the abbreviated reference to Tengku Razaleigh) ... they want to know when he will be in Kota Baru, what he's doing, where he's going," says this amiable and trusted loyalist to the Kelantan prince.

And when Tengku Razaleigh made his first trip back to Kelantan following his appointment, a massive crowd waited at the airport to give him a rousing welcome.

As more than a few Umno figures present at the airport were to observe, there were among the crowd a large number of Umno faces who had not been glimpsed at Umno functions in years.

"We call him the new CPO ... chief political officer, lah! I am not exaggerating but there's a new mood in the air here. You can feel the excitement," says Rozali.

Others even claim that Ku Li's appointment has had an electrifying effect on Kelantanese.

However, what's clear even at this early stage is that Tengku Razaleigh's new prominence in Umno is likely to change the political equation in Kelantan to one in which Pas and Umno will fight out the coming polls on a more or less equal footing.

Or, to put it more bluntly, Kelantan will be less of a "gone case" for the Barisan Nasional.

Pas leaders in Kelantan are worried although they would be loath to admit it. Kelantan is their showcase State and speakers at almost every Pas ceramah rarely fail to point to the Kelantan Government as proof of their ability to rule.

Besides, being in power in at least one State in the country gives them immense leverage in the table talk now taking place among the opposition parties over the all-important issue of seats allocation and their joint manifesto.

In that sense, their grip on Kelantan is crucial to their political survival.

A large number of Pas leaders actually believe that this general election will mean glory in the Malay crescent States as well as provide them the foot in the door to areas out of their traditional rural-Malay strongholds.

It explains, to a large extent, why the top leadership is prepared to even drop any mention of the Islamic State from the joint manifesto that the four opposition allies - Pas, DAP, Keadilan and PRM - are still poring over.

Two technical committees were set up - one to draw up the joint manifesto (headed by the new PRM vice-president Rustam A. Sani) and the other to discuss the allocation of seats among the parties (headed by Pas central committee member Datuk Hishamudin Yahya).

The draft manifesto - said to be largely the effort of Rustam - is apparently ready and has been sent out to the different parties for comment and feedback.

Those who have seen it find it an "impressive" document touching on a variety of aspects and spelling out broad goals and ideals without

mentioning the Islamic State or even the contentious issue of whether the coalition intends to topple the BN Government or simply deny the BN its two-thirds majority.

The parties have also decided that there will not be any common symbol; they intend to stick to their existing logos.

"We are working well at the level of the technical committees," says Dr Hatta Ramli, a member of the Pas central committee.

DAP chairman Dr Chen Man Hin is a little more frank: "There are quite a number of difficulties. Let's just say we are inching along."

The leaders of the four opposition parties have also got their act together with joint statements after an earlier period of contradicting each other over issues like which party the Prime Ministership would go to, or whether they intended to form the next Government or dent the BN's two-thirds majority.

But that does not mean that all is well beneath the surface. The DAP is still in a dilemma of sorts about being seen in a coalition that involves Pas - Islamic State or no Islamic State.

For a while it was toying with what was known as the "three-plus-one formula", that is Pas, Keadilan and PRM in one pact while DAP remains a friendly ally.

Says a national DAP figure: "It's tough going on the ground for us especially with all that talk about going for power ... and the ground cannot accept co-operating with Pas. That alone (co-operation with Pas) scares them."

DAP's problem lies in the way the Chinese appear to be taking a conservative and cautious approach.

The general Chinese sentiment is not so much for the BN as it is for maintaining the status quo. However, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's coming China visit will have a definite impact on the community here.

Overall, the Chinese remain highly suspicious of the religious politics of Pas.

For decades Pas has bothered little with the non-Muslim/non-Malay nor has it bothered to venture beyond exclusively Malay issues. As such it can hardly expect an open-arm welcome just because it has suddenly begun to articulate broader issues.

And dropping the Islamic State issue from the joint manifesto will not make a real difference to how non-Muslims perceive the party, particularly since Pas leaders from Datuk Fadzil Noor to Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat have declared that it will remain the party's eternal goal.

As for Keadilan, it is still too new and indefinite for them to relate to.

"The problem is, businessmen and older Chinese still see the Anwar issue as a power struggle between Dr Mahathir and his former deputy. So their attitude is, better not to get involved," says Tang Ah Chai, Youth head of the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall, a body that carries some clout in shaping the opinion of the Chinese community.

Tang was approached to join Keadilan to which he is frankly sympathetic. But he declined for reasons of his own although his predecessor at SCAH was among the 42 Chinese who joined the party at a special ceremony last month.

Those familiar with Pas say that just because decisions have been agreed to at meetings does not guarantee that Pas leaders will not change their minds when they take the decision back to their grassroots.

Pas leaders are very sensitive to the views and demands of their supporters in the kampung because their influence in the party is not dependent on patronage but on support from the ground.

For instance, although a number of Pas leaders were keen to allow non-

Muslims to contest under their banner this general election, the idea has run up against stiff resistance on the ground, hence, the cooling of words on the subject.

Likewise, the proposal not to mention the Islamic State in the joint manifesto has yet to be tested out on the party grassroots.

Pas co-operation with this many other parties is remarkable for this is the first time it has stepped so far outside that exclusive Islamic circle of politics since the era of Tan Sri Mohamed Asri Muda, a former Pas president and Menteri Besar of Kelantan who later crossed over to Umno.

This is also the first time that Pas and DAP have actually sat at the same table for face-to-face negotiations. In fact, DAP politicians say they were surprised to learn how politically savvy their Pas counterparts were.

The ultimate test of how well these four parties will gell together will probably be most visible when negotiations really get going on who gets how many seats and where.

Already some think that Keadilan's demand for 60 parliamentary seats is a bit over the top given that it came into the picture only a few months ago but DAP's Ronnie Liu thinks the number is not unreasonable given the feelings on the ground.

A possible area of friction may lie in the fact that all four parties are eyeing urban-based seats.

Pas is actually the only party in the coalition with a strong rural network but it is keen to shed its provincial image by venturing into urban seats.

As for the DAP, its strength has traditionally been in the towns and cities.

Likewise, PRM has become more urban-based over the years both in terms of the issues it takes up and the support it enjoys from urban-based intellectuals and groups. Even the NGOs, which have recently thrown their support behind PRM, are largely urban-rooted.

Keadilan's interest also lies in urban seats especially in the Klang Valley where it is most confident of support.

Although not publicly articulated, DAP's cautious attitude has been like a spoke in the wheel of the larger ambitions of the other parties.

If the other parties seem keen to adopt the campaign strategy of unseating the BN, it is primarily because they are aware that such a line will appeal to Malay voters who, having tasted power, will not settle for a party whose aim is merely to form a strong opposition.

Privately, a number of opposition figures acknowledge that even to deny the BN its two-thirds majority would be tough enough, what more wresting control of Parliament.

Moreover, Kelantan alone will be a headache by itself for Pas.

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