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Focus-Khalil

UMNO UNITY, GENERAL ELECTION ARE CHALLENGES FACING KHALIL

By: Ali Mamat

KUALA LUMPUR: For Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob his appointments as the Umno secretary general and the new Information Minister are not awards handed to him on a silver platter.

His appointments couldn't have come at a hotter time, when the 10th general election is just around the corner and when the effects of the economic slowdown and the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim as Deputy Prime Minister and Umno Deputy President last September, are being fully exploited by the opposition parties.

Even though he has passed his early test with the excellent handling of the just ended 1999 Umno general assembly, the heavier responsibility of ensuring that Umno and the Barisan Nasional continue to remain in power after the general election awaits Khalil.

To achieve that, the former Pahang Menteri Besar should ensure that Umno members return to the fold after the fallout by some members following Anwar's ouster.

He should also ensure that the whole government machinery at the Information Ministry, including RTM and the Information Department, move quickly to restore public confidence in the government that had been eroded somewhat by the Anwar issue and economic slowdown.

Khalil admitted that the two new duties are full of challenges. But he is confident that with patience, the cooperation of everybody and with the right strategy, the ruling BN coalition will again emerge a winner in the coming election.

This was proven in the Sabah state election in March when the BN, considered an underdog, put up a sterling performance when it won 31 of the 48 seats in the state assembly. Khalil played the key role of Umno Director of Elections in Sabah then.

When he was Pahang Menteri Besar, he managed to change the state's image from agriculture-based to one that is industrially progressive in the east coast of the peninsula, in fact, more developed than some of the states in the west coast.

Khalil succeeded in attracting many local and foreign investors to Pahang as can be seen in the Gebeng industrial area, Kuantan, Temerloh industrial estate, and the assembly of several types of vehicles in Pekan.

According to many observers, Khalil had accomplished all these without much fanfare or chest-beating, very much in accord with his reticent personality.

Apparently, his good work encouraged the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir who is also the Umno President to choose Khalil as the best candidate to replace Datuk Seri Mohamed Rahmat as the Information Minister and Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik as Umno secretary general in May.

Khalil, a former diplomat, admitted that any one appointed as Umno secretary general should be very patient, be prepared to listen and receive criticism because with a membership of 2.8 million, Umno could have countless problems.

"Alhamdulillah, I have the patience and am prepared to listen to criticism provided that they are constructive," said Khalil in an interview with Bernama recently.

Khalil believes it would be easy to instill unity among members because he preferred going down to the grassroots to have a first-hand look at problems cropping up at the branch, division or state liaison committee

levels.

"I prefer to go down to have a closer look, rather than wait for reports," he said.

According to him if genuine unity could be instilled among the 2.8 million members, Umno will be able to create a big block which could form a strong foundation for the government that could not be threatened by anyone.

Khalil also plans to take advantage of information technology by implementing it in all levels of the party's administration by ensuring all the Umno branches and divisions are on-line with the headquarters to reduce paperwork, besides making full use of the Internet.

He said computer literate staff who constantly follow local political developments and are up-to-date with party policies would be given responsibilities to coordinate and update Umno's Website so that all messages are disseminated and replies are given quickly to the various slanderous accusations hurled against Umno and the government, without having to refer here or there before action is taken.

In spite of this, he believes that inter-personal communication by the professionals like the officers of the Information Department would be more effective in explaining to the rakyat various issues like the sacking of Anwar because it gives the opportunity for questions and answers.

However, said Khalil, it is wrong to think that the responsibility of explaining government policies to the people rests solely on the shoulders of the Information Minister.

"All ministers are spokesmen of the government... not just the Information Minister. All the ministers, Menteri Besar and other important national leaders should be given adequate air time on TV to explain the policies of the government," he said.

Khalil believes that whatever confusion that arose from the expulsion of Anwar from Umno, the loyalty of the Malays towards Umno and the national leadership still remains intact because they cannot afford to lose their political power just because of one issue.

"If Umno loses its power, the country would be in chaos and all the privileges, comfort and freedom enjoyed by the Malays all this while in terms of religion, education, housing, land ownership and so on, would be lost," he said.

Khalil reminded the Malays that even before this latest incident, there were certain quarters which had questioned Umno's policy of distributing land to the Malays through the Felda land scheme.

He said the Malays cannot count on PAS to lead the administration of the country because that opposition party had failed to fulfil its pledge to create an Islamic administration in Kelantan or to develop that north-eastern state.

Khalil said PAS' plan to open up its membership to the non-Malays showed that the party is now caught by its charges of apostacy against others, and that it is one of the party's ploys to fish for votes for its candidates standing in non-Malay constituencies in the coming polls.

During the interview, Khalil also spoke briefly on the prospects of development in the east coast states, especially Pahang and Terengganu.

He said although he had managed to bring some developments to Pahang during his terms as Menteri Besar, he is forced to leave the state for his new posts at a time when he has yet to complete his many tasks to benefit the east coast states on the whole.

He said he is rather disappointed for not being able to see the federal programmes of building rail links from the west coast to Pahang and Terengganu as well as the highway link from Karak to Besut, Terengganu, becoming a reality.

The railway and highway, he said, are two infrastructures vital to the development of more industries and new growth centres in the east coast states.

He is surprised that the highway project is still being held up when Pahang and Terengganu have the means to provide the capital if they were given a role in the construction of the highway project.

"Terengganu is rich with its oil and gas resources while Pahang with six of its large companies listed on the stock exchange, can surely find the financial resources for the project any time," he said.

Khalil also commented on the general perception that there were more developments and progress in Pahang which has fewer resources when compared with Terengganu.

"I have always said that if we, the east coast states, want to attract investors, we should draw up a common strategy. I hope that the next generation of leaders of the east coast states would think and act globally for their own interest," he said.

For this, he said, it is important that they should have their representatives in all missions to attract foreign investments.

"In Pahang's case, the 'power of persuasion' could have a hand in its success so far," he said. -- Bernama

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