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Sounds of a foxhunt in Umno elections

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THE present day Gua Musang parliamentary seat is actually the result of a metamorphosis.

It was originally known as the Ulu Kelantan seat but come the 1982 general elections, it became the Gua Musang seat and the name has stuck since.

The name-change does not change the perceptions of the seat, though. On the one hand, Ulu Kelantan means a godforsaken part of Kelantan. On the other, Gua Musang, when translated, means the fox's lair and that is equally remote.

Gua Musang's geographical location and physical under-development justify both names.

But, however much the constituency is perceived to be in the backwaters of economic growth, it has the knack of getting national attention in the political sphere.

And much of this has to be attributed to its Member of Parliament, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, who has made the constituency famous, or infamous, depending on which way one chooses to look at it.

Unlike his predecessors, Tengku Razaleigh has had the opportunity to reign supreme in this constituency both while it was known as Ulu Kelantan and when it became Gua Musang.

When he first took over the constituency in 1974 and in the 13 years that followed, Tengku Razaleigh was seen by Umno supporters as the wily politician who had every right to make the constituency his personal lair.

By 1987, however, after the bitter battle in which he lost to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for Umno presidency and his decision to leave the party to lead Semangat 46, perceptions of him changed, especially among Umno grassroot members.

He had, by then, become a musang berbulu ayam (fox with chicken feathers) or what they say in English, a wolf in sheep's clothing.

This tag lasted for nine years and only ended when Semangat 46 was dissolved and Tengku Razaleigh led the party members back into Umno en bloc.

Now, four years later, as the Umno divisional meeting draws to an end, Tengku Razaleigh is ignominiously described as the pontianak Gua Musang (the vampire of Gua Musang), borrowed from the title of an old Malay movie produced by Cathay Keris.

The movie has no underlying political message nor is it satirical but it is being bandied about to reflect how some Umno members feel about Tengku Razaleigh at this stage when the party election is moving into top gear.

In short, his detractors see him as someone not doing any good to the party and not helping in efforts by the Umno leadership to create a clear line of succession after the removal of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim as the deputy president in 1998.

There was much media-hype, especially in the foreign publications, that Tengku Razaleigh may decide to go against either Dr Mahathir or Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

However, such speculation fell flat as early as when the divisional meetings had passed merely the halfway mark as Tengku Razaleigh failed to garner the necessary nominations to qualify to contest for either the president or deputy president posts.

Just when the detractors were beginning to rejoice that he had failed to

create any problems to the succession process, nominations for Tengku Razaleigh for the vice presidency race touched 16.

There is only one division, Bandar Tun Razak, which has not held its meeting yet and is scheduled to do so tomorrow.

On the same day, Tengku Razaleigh has called for the Gua Musang divisional committee meeting.

The attention on Bandar Tun Razak is for obvious reasons: whether it will deliver the all important nomination to ensure Tengku Razaleigh qualifies as one of the candidates for vice presidency.

The Gua Musang committee meeting has the makings of a political intrigue apart from complications to the nomination process of Umno divisions.

The Gua Musang delegates had, on March 31, decided to entrust the task of making the nominations of candidates with the divisional committee.

The question here is whether such a move is legitimate in so far as the Umno constitution is concerned.

If Bandar Tun Razak does not deliver the vice president nomination for Tengku Razaleigh, he would need the Gua Musang nomination to qualify.

If the Gua Musang committee, of which he is chairman, does nominate him, then it will be construed as a decision made, if not influenced, by Tengku Razaleigh himself.

That would mean Tengku Razaleigh is going back on his word that he had no plans to contest in this party election.

At the same time, supporters of Tengku Razaleigh would argue that he specified that he had no plans to contest for the president and deputy president posts but not any other posts, including the vice presidency.

That, of course, is debatable, depending on which side of the political coin one stands.

More interestingly, will Tengku Razaleigh accept the nominations, regardless of whether he qualifies through Bandar Tun Razak or his own Gua Musang division?

The prevailing mood indicates that he will accept the nominations, for, turning down this opportunity will mean that he had allowed himself to miss the boat. This is definitely his last chance to join the ranks of those in the Umno succession hierarchy.

However, even if he accepts the nominations, that does not mean he will win one of the three vice president slots that easily as there are nine other contenders who had qualified with relative ease.

At the same time, past Umno elections have shown that it is too simplistic to conclude that nominations will definitely be translated into votes as was proven when Tengku Razaleigh took on Dr Mahathir in 1987.

That, however, was then. During Tengku Razaleigh's sojourn in the political wilderness, new faces have emerged in Umno.

With that, trends have changed and Tengku Razaleigh will find that things are no more the same as it was in 1987, the last time he locked horns in Umno for a party post.

Some of these new faces do not have the same affection for him as the previous generation who used to view Tengku Razaleigh as a politician who was as wily as a fox.

It is unlikely these new Umno guys will join Tengku Razaleigh in his rendezvous this time around.

Unless, they are into foxtrot.

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