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What's next for Ku Li?

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EARLY this year, despite his electoral debacle in Kelantan, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, looked, even if fleetingly, like a figure of "some influential force" within Umno, which delighted his friends and perplexed his opponents.

Though he had no new economic or political message, he seemed - to some people - to answer a need in Umno, even the electorate. It does seem, characteristically, that it is not substance but personal antagonism against the current leadership that appeals to and unites these people. They forget that conceptual or ideological void, like the lack of a strategy, is (and will always be) a recipe for failure.

How quickly things change. Last week he failed, in a spectacular way, to garner the 50 division nominations required to put his name on the ballot paper for the May 11 Umno presidential election. As a result, incumbent president, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was nominated by 133 divisions, won unopposed. Razaleigh managed to get only one nomination. He has even failed to get the minimum nominations to stand for the post of deputy president (33 divisions) and vice president (17 divisions). Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi, the vice president performing the duties of deputy president, took the second spot, also uncontested, making him effectively Dr Mahathir's heir. Obviously, past experiences and failures did not, and could not, contain the activism of Razaleigh's supporters. They may try again in 2003.

The thriller will be the contest for the three vice presidents which has attracted ... qualified candidates consumed by a common yearning to be Abdullah's heir. Umno tradition dictates that when the deputy president inherits the presidency, he has to choose one of the three vice presidents to fill the post vacated by him.

For sure, there was a counter-current of insurgency within Umno but the movement petered out as quickly as it started because the insurgents this time around simply did not excite the majority of Umno members as it did in 1987 when Razaleigh narrowly lost to Dr Mahathir (47 votes). He left Umno in a huff to form a breakaway party - Semangat 46. Dismayed - after 10 years in the political wilderness - he returned to the Umno fold in 1996. Dr Mahathir then made him leader of Kelantan Umno, but he failed miserably in the last November general election to regain the State Government which he helped hand over to Pas in 1990.

In a prospering economy (and following Umno's mediocre performance in the last general election partly because of infighting in the party), Umno members could not be easily energised by the politics of hatred, envy and personal attack. They instead rallied, as demonstrated by the results of divisional meetings, behind the leadership to fight what I would call "a serious war" which is going on openly and quietly in the nation for "the soul of the Malays".

Every insurgency runs its course, and this one which tries to split the party again, appears to have done so.

Razaleigh is, to be sure, a very correct man who admired the urbane Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, the Founding Father of Malaysia whose tolerance accorded absolute latitude for Anglo-Chinese economic hegemony of the nation which later offended the Malays and became a part of many reasons which caused the vicious Sino-Malay riots on May 13 1969.

The Kelantan prince is a figure of contradictions who belongs to Umno

and judges it unfavourably at the same time. This doublethink - the capacity of holding two contradictory views in one's mind and accepting both of them - I think, makes him an "outsider" and a sitting target. Only Musa Hitam seems to get away with criticism and sneering. But then, Musa is a talkative pensioner.

Those who have talked to Razaleigh recently say they do not come away with a clear sense that here is a man of vision. They are impressed, as usual, by his unfailing courtesy, hospitality and charm. Said one: "He seems to think that power is his birthright, definitely he has a pervasive feudal mentality which works against him. I do not believe Umno members can accept him as the leader of the party." He is not perceived as a dynamic alternative to Dr Mahathir, the symbol of Malay modernity and Asian renaissance.

I told the visitor: "Ku Li's main political asset in Qua Musang is his name." Razaleigh deserves the support and loyalty of the electorate there (even if it is dwindling) for what he did for the district which he first represented in the State Legislative Assembly in 1969, and in Parliament since 1974.

The visitor volunteered: "I can't believe it ... he is surrounded by delusional characters, who will argue and try to convince you that their prince is the savior of Umno and Malaysia." Because of those characters, this Umno election may not be Razaleigh's last (he will be 63 years old sometime this month). But it may well be the last in which almost every one pays him much attention. Certainly, he has not spurned the party. It has snubbed him.

Razaleigh is too old to be slighted, too weak to be appeased and too ambitious, therefore quite unwise, to be taken for granted.

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