

PAS launches onslaught in Kubang Pasu

STAR

21 FEB 2001

Very few people have heard of Kampung Tok Kesop, a sleepy hamlet in the Prime Minister's parliamentary constituency of Kubang Pasu. But suddenly a flurry of activity has been taking place there, leading to speculation that PAS is trying to undermine Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's power base, writes FARID JAMALUDIN.

MOST of the inhabitants of Kampung Tok Kesop, 12km from Alor Star, are padi farmers.

On most days, they are asleep by 9pm, after the *isyak* prayers.

But the quiet village has become a converging point for opposition figures and supporters since Sunday.

And the reason is that PAS is holding a six-day "Islamic Exposition" in the area.

The expo resembles a *pasar malam*, with food stalls and party activists selling VCDs and political cassettes.

The main drawcard is a series of *ceramah* involving PAS and its allies in the opposition front.

They include PAS deputy president Hadi Haji Abdul Awang, secretary-general Nasharudin Mat Isa, Parti Keadilan Nasional president Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Ismail, her number two Dr Chandra Muzaffar, DAP chief Lim Kit

bers into the party.

Keadilan also said that the Kubang Pasu Umno had weakened with the recent resignation of information chief Datuk Shuib Endut, who had been rumoured to join Keadilan.

In the 1995 general election, Dr Mahathir beat PAS candidate Ahmad Muhammad Alim with a thumping majority of 17,226. His majority was reduced to 10,000 votes in the 1999 elections.

Kubang Pasu Umno deputy chairman Tan Sri Osman Aroff said the opposition had a hidden "national" agenda in staging the exposition.

"They hope to erode the voters' confidence in Dr Mahathir's leadership as both Umno president and Prime Minister by continuing to attack his power base," he said.

However, he said this would not work because the division had launched a "round the clock" surveillance of the opposition's tactics.

"We know it means business by bringing in Lim Kit Siang who has never set foot in Kubang Pasu before. But we have our counter-measures," he added.

However, Osman also criticised party leaders who have yet to see the significance of what he called the opposition's continuing assault on Kubang Pasu.

Siang and PRM chairman Dr Syed Hussein Ali.

"It does not matter if we can't topple Dr Mahathir in his own yard but we want to register our presence here," said one PAS official.

With the Malay unity talks stalled as a result of pre-conditions imposed by PAS, the Islamist party is using the expo to explain its side of the story.

And with Umno division elections just around the corner, it is also apparent that PAS wants to split Umno's unity, especially in Kubang Pasu.

Political observers believe that the opposition parties are taking advantage of PAS' 50th anniversary this year to double their "mid-term" election preparations.

Said Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib: "The expo is PAS' arrogance at the highest level.

"First, it introduces impossible conditions to resume the unity talks and now it wants to influence Umno supporters in Kubang Pasu on the pretext of having a trade fair."

He said Umno could have staged a similar expo in the nearby parliamentary constituency of Pendang, held by PAS president Datuk Fadzil Noor.

Over the last few weeks, the opposition has attempted to demonstrate its growing influence in Kubang Pasu, whose constituents are 90% Malays.

Last week, police were called in to break up a Keadilan rally of 5,000 people with the party claiming that it wanted to celebrate the entry of 405 former Umno mem-

"We would appreciate it if some Umno top guns could rally to Dr Mahathir's defence," he said.

He said other Barisan component parties could also help the division in countering the opposition's smear campaign against Dr Mahathir.

"The opposition is championing national issues and there is so little we can do (at the local level) in this type of battle," he admitted.

PAS state commissioner Azizan Abdul Razak said the expo should not be seen as an opposition move to undermine Dr Mahathir's home base.

"In fact, there are other divisions which are planning to have a similar trade expo in their areas and bring members to the party's cause," he said.

He also said that if Umno or its Barisan component parties believed in their party struggles, then there was nothing to fear from PAS and the opposition parties' "information exchanging" exercise.

Another PAS leader said Dr Mahathir was now facing a lot of pressure from Umno leaders themselves — those who were openly asking him to step down.

"We are just complementing their efforts but we want to make sure that Kubang Pasu will not be an Umno stronghold anymore," he added.

DAP, in trying to secure the Chinese votes, sought PAS' support in the SJK (C) Damansara controversy during the expo.

The onslaught in Kubang Pasu appears to be an indication of what is in store for the next general election, scheduled for 2004.