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Pas' second thoughts on unity

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THE last-minute postponement of the meeting between Umno and Pas this week may have been caused by the latter asking for additional conditions.

But many observers and commentators believe they are a ruse, the real reason being Pas having second thoughts about the meeting.

The party was caught in a bind when Umno agreed to expand the scope of the meeting to cover national issues, which include the treatment of the former Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, as demanded by Pas.

Pas had not expected Umno to agree to expanding the scope of the meeting beyond the so-called Malay unity. Pas had earlier dismissed the issue saying that the Malays are not disunited. The disunity, said its president Datuk Fadzil Noor in an interview with the *Mingguan Malaysia* newspaper a Sunday ago, is among Malays in Umno.

There could be two major reasons for Pas to seek last-minute postponement of the meeting which was scheduled for Monday. One concerns the meeting itself and the other the reaction to it among Pas leaders.

There are worries on the Pas side that what Umno may reveal at the meeting could weaken their ability to attack Umno and the Government, particularly on the Anwar issue.

Pas is less interested in fighting for the former Deputy Prime Minister than in using his case for political gain. There are many in Pas who disliked Anwar intensely when he was in the Government. They saw him as a traitor when he left the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (Abim) to join Umno in 1982.

While Fadzil and Anwar remained on good terms, others in Pas were less accommodating. They considered him a turncoat and a stumbling block.

Clearly, Pas is not unanimous about the meeting with Umno. While Fadzil is keen, other key figures are less enthusiastic. They fear that a truce will weaken their onslaught.

Some say they were reminded of the setback the party suffered when it joined the Barisan Nasional in 1974. The party was sacked from the coalition in 1977 by the then Prime Minister, Tun Hussein Onn.

But what is not often mentioned is the fact that Pas cleverly used its membership of the BN to spread its wings. It was during this period that it set up ranting (branches) in all the Federal Land Development Authority (Felda) schemes using the influence of its president late Tan Sri Mohd Asri Muda who was Land and Regional Development Minister.

As president, Fadzil is compelled to react to Umno's invitation. The situation was made more complicated for him when he met the Prime Minister and Umno president, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, quite by chance in Alor Star in December last year.

With the media making a song and dance about the Alor Star meeting, Fadzil was forced to react. In reality, nothing political happened at the meeting. The two leaders happened to be attending the same Ramadan break of fast invitation by the Albukhari Foundation.

The hawks in Pas, like its youth chief Mahfuz Omar and Member of Parliament for Kuala Kedah Mohamad Sabu, are against the meeting. Mahfuz, being from Kedah, recognises Dr Mahathir's ability to convince people in face-to-face meetings.

Furthermore, since winning the Padang Terap parliamentary seat in the 1999 election, Mahfuz fashioned himself into a maverick. He was clearly

disappointed at not being able to proceed with the proposed debate with the Umno Youth chief, Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein.

While the Kelantan Menteri Besar and the head of Pas Council of Ulama, Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, is willing to go along with Fadzil, the Terengganu Menteri Besar and Pas deputy president, Abdul Hadi Awang, is less keen.

This is understandable. It is well known in Pas that Nik Aziz and Abdul Hadi do not often see eye to eye, not least because one is from Kelantan and the other from Terengganu. There has always been deep rivalry between the two States.

If previously the rivalry was seen only during football matches involving teams from the two States, the trend is being now carried into the political arena as Pas now controls both States.

Although Nik Aziz and Hadi are both ulama, they differ in their education and outlook. Nik Aziz is more orthodox and is inclined towards rule by the clergy. Some compare his style to the Iranian mullah. Abdul Hadi, on the other hand, is more attuned to the universalism of the Ikhwanul Muslimin or Muslim Brotherhood.

Then there is the intellectual group which is a new force in Pas. It is made up of former university lecturers, religious affairs officers, talk show hosts and private sector professionals. They are beginning to exert influence on the party.

Although Pas has lately become fond of saying that Umno is disunited, the invitation for the Umno-Pas talk is threatening to expose its own disunity. For a start, it shows that Pas is not the monolithic party that a lot of people think it is. It is more fractured than Umno.

But it is a big mistake for Umno to take the meeting lightly. Having tasted blood, Pas craves for another kill.

It is becoming harder by the day to believe that the United States and its Western allies are serious about getting rid of President Saddam Hussein.

The US has been on a turkey shoot for the Iraqi President for more than 10 years. A major war has been fought and endless assaults have taken place during that time.

The latest was an air raid by US and British war planes on Feb 17, killing two civilians.

Hundreds of thousands civilians, mostly children and the elderly, have died in Allied bombings. Many more are dying as a result of the UN-sanctioned embargo.

Every now and then the Western media would report that Saddam was on the verge of being overthrown by his disgruntled soldiers.

Every now and then too the US and its Western allies would drop a few bombs or fired a few rockets into Iraq. Miraculously, Saddam escaped unscathed but many civilians were killed or maimed.

There is no sign to suggest that Saddam is about to give up or that his soldiers are going to drag him out of his bunker screaming and yelling.

So what is really happening? The answer is obvious. The US has no intention of getting rid of Saddam.

In fact, the US wants Saddam to continue living and leading Iraq, for getting rid of him is as good as removing the *raison d'etre* for the entire US strategy in the Middle East.

Without Saddam, there is no enemy to contend with. The US military superiority will degenerate, its defence industry will stagnate and its allies in the Middle East will no longer need its protection.

The US is a nation built on war and patriotism. It fought for its independence. It participated in all the major wars of the 20th century. Its security and defence strategy since the Cold War is based on external

threat.

First, there were the Soviets and their communist allies. When the Cold War ended and the Soviet empire collapsed, the small enemies like Libya, Iran and Cuba, and later Iraq, were upgraded to major threats.

Cuba and Iraq are tiny compared to the Soviet Union. But this does not stop the US from treating them as major threats not only to its safety but purportedly to the safety of the whole world.

With many belligerent leaders mellowing and becoming more moderate, the US is running dangerously short of enemies. So Osama bin Ladin comes in handy.

For now nobody beats Saddam, not even Fidel Castro who lives next door. So, every second of his life, whether he is directing the affairs of the state, having a picnic with his family or sleeping in his desert tent, is important to the US. He must be kept alive for his belligerence keeps the US way of life going.

To believe otherwise is to condemn the US as a failure. That is typically un-American. Over the decades, the US intelligence apparatus despatched countless enemies, ranging from foreign spies to heads of state. The likes of President Ngo Dinh Diem of former South Vietnam and Salvador Allende of Chile.

For the newly inaugurated President George W. Bush lobbing a few bombs into Saddam's compound is nothing more than following in his father's footsteps. He has to tell Americans he is as tough as his father was. He has to send the right signals to the rest of the world not to mess with America.

As for Britain's Tony Blair, joining Bush in the turkey shoot provided him with a talking point for his visit to Washington and relieved him of the headache he is having at home.

Unfortunately, while the US and its allies play cat-and-mouse with Saddam, more and more Iraqi children die of malnutrition and lack of medicine.

Last, but not least, the attack provided a distraction for the accidental sinking of a Japanese fishing vessel by a US submarine in the Pacific on Feb 9. Nine Japanese, including high school students and teachers, are still missing, feared dead.

Selangor is raising water rates by between 20 and 75 per cent in a couple of days.

Menteri Besar Dr Mohd Khir Toyo said the new rates would guarantee consumers cleaner and uninterrupted supply.

No matter what the assurances are, the higher rates will impose an additional burden on the consumers.

And not everybody is lucky to have their water bills paid by the Government or their employers.

The higher rates may be justifiable. Production and distribution costs may have risen. But to the consumers, the higher rates can only be justified by guaranteeing them uninterrupted supply of clean water.

No more water cuts or murky, silt-laden water. But who is to monitor and determine that the water will be cleaner as pledged by Dr Mohd Khir?

The conservation of water resources and the more efficient use of treated water must be incorporated into the state water policy.

Hopefully, the higher rates will encourage consumers to conserve water and learn to make more efficient use of the depleting resource. This needs education.

I hope Dr Mohd Khir also takes a look at the complaint against the offer of 20.23 hectares of State land in Batu Caves to a consortium of three companies as it involves his administration.

As a continuing lesson in environmental preservation, I would like to

share the following letter from reader Julie Lim of Taman Desa Seputih, Kuala Lumpur, with Dr Mohd Khir.

She wrote: "I lived in Taman Desa Seputih and even until last year I occasionally had very colourful visitors to my few palm trees in my very small garden in the morning. These birds come in bright yellow, red and blue plumage. It's really therapeutic seeing them and hearing them chirping.

"I have not seen any since Berjaya cleared off some land for a housing project and another portion by the developer of the fast train to KLIA.

"A few days ago my husband pointed out two monkeys on my nangka (jack fruit) tree. Finding that there was no food, they made their way along the power line. I have not seen any monkey in this area in the entire 10 years that we have lived in this location and felt so sad seeing them wandering in search of food, not from tree to tree but from electrical pole to electrical pole. It is so sad.

"So it is not only fresh air and water that Dr Mohd Khir has to think about but also the birds and the monkeys that are losing their homes."

I am happy to share with Julie that I have at least five types of birds flying free and nesting in my garden - the mynah, oriole (so I think), finch, bulbul, kingfisher and house sparrow.

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