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Umno needs to buck up all round to meet resurgent Pas in Kedah

Zubaidah Abu Bakar

WHEN Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad returned to his home State of Kedah to celebrate Aidil Adha, he brought several important messages to party members.

One was that Umno and the Malays must be united if the party hopes to continue championing the interests of the Malays in the country. This, in fact encompasses all his message on Umno, the Malays and their future.

Certainly, the upcoming divisional elections are his points of reference in stressing the need for a united and strong Umno saying that their actions should not further widen existing rifts.

The Prime Minister spoke about this within the perspective of the next general election in 2004.

He issued reminders at closed-door meetings with State and grassroots leaders and in his speeches.

At a closed-door meeting with State leaders at Bangunan Tunku on the eve of Aidil Adha, Dr Mahathir stressed there should only be contests where necessary. At the joint opening of Kubang Pasu Umno branches annual general meetings at Dewan Jitra, he reminded members that Umno had been able to unite the Malays when the race was weak to fight against the Malayan Union.

A Kubang Pasu division committee member said Dr Mahathir did not say that there should be no contest at all but he did give a classic example of a compromise reached to avert a contest, citing the case of Datuk Dr Yusof Noor giving way to Datuk Idris Jusoh to head the Besut division in Terengganu.

It is not as if Umno does not have leaders like Yusof in Kedah. Datuk Zakaria Said, the Kuala Kedah division chief of 14 years, has no regrets about giving up his post if this, in his words, can rejuvenate the weakening division.

"There is nothing to feel proud of if the division you are leading is weak.

Although political observers describe campaigning for divisional elections lebih hebat dari pilihanraya umum (more intense than the general election), it is still too early to say that the incumbents in Kedah's other 14 divisions will not emulate Zakaria and make way for new leaders.

A leader from the Sungai Petani division said Dr Mahathir's reminder to avoid a power struggle and fights for positions should be given serious thought by both the incumbents and aspirants.

He said although contesting for posts was a democratic right, it would be meaningless if contests weakened the party.

After its poor performance in the last general election in Kedah, Umno is faced with a big task in restoring the people's confidence.

One of Umno's weaknesses now is getting the support and confidence of young people, many of whom seem to be leaning towards the Opposition.

They simply cannot identify themselves with Umno.

Consider how Kedah Umno Youth led by Wahab Din is receiving little support from Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishamuddin Hussein in contrast to Pas Youth chief Mahfuz Omar, who is based in Kedah, pushing very hard for the party's youth wing under the leadership of Aris Awang to continue organising activities like soccer and fishing competitions as well as leadership courses to attract young supporters.

Wanita Umno too has to buck up as its counterpart in Pas is courting

young Malay women. Kedah Pas' Dewan Muslimat has started organising activities to fill its coffers to finance activities which are specially tailored for women constituents.

Wanita Umno chief Rosnah Majid and her Wanita Umno executive councillors should sit up and be proactive now that Pas is training penceramah (speakers) and vote wooers to concentrate on women.

Another threat to Kedah Umno is the State Pas' bulletin Fitrah, whose circulation is expected to reach 20,000 before the next general election.

The irony, and perhaps tragedy, is that some senior Umno leaders in the State are not even aware of the existence of this bulletin although it has already gone into its fourth edition.

State Pas commissioner Azizan Abdul Razak recently announced the setting up of Chinese-speaking teams to woo Chinese support to complement efforts of its Inter-Racial Communication Bureau headed by Kuala Kedah MP Mohd Sabu.

Perhaps Syed Razak should consider a suggestion from a veteran party member that specific people be appointed to monitor Pas' activities in the State closely. After all, it makes sense to know not only your enemies' weaknesses but strengths as well.

But many Umno leaders in the State agree that it is internal bickerings that is weakening the party and not Pas' increasing strength. As it is, there are now people contesting for posts associating themselves with certain groups.

They claim to be the "MB's men, Pak Lah's men (deputy Umno president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) and Sanusi's (former Menteri Besar Tan Sri Sanusi Junid) men".

It is time for both incumbents to wise up and realise the risks they are exposing Umno in their selfish quest for positions and power.