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'Umno has a long way to go to regain its political dominance'

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Umno has a long way to go to regain the political dominance it once enjoyed and should not become complacent despite a weakening Opposition and its own growing acceptance.

New Straits Times Press group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, speaking at a luncheon talk today, said the party has to rid itself of the taint besmirching its name.

"It will have to clearly demonstrate that a leopard can, in fact, really change its spots or it will have a tough time in the next elections, although it is my honest opinion that it will still win," he said.

The talk, organised by the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute, was attended by 40 members of the Strategic Issues Forum and CEO Council comprising business leaders and diplomats.

Abdullah, a former political adviser to Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, said since the Sept 11 attacks on the United States, Malaysia has seen the demise of the Opposition Front when DAP pulled out over its differences with Pas on the Islamic state.

Of the remaining Opposition Front members, Parti Keadilan Nasional was affected by the same sort of internal politics which split Umno not long ago.

"All this, of course, should be music to the ears of Barisan Nasional leaders.

"However, I hope they won't be lulled into complacency by the sweet voices of the sirens.

He also said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad continued to yield political benefits because he has worked hard and taken measures that had the support of most people.

"His position in the Government, and in Umno, remains entrenched."

He added that Umno was creeping back into acceptance because of improvements in the party and Government, but a lot also depended on economic recovery and global developments.

"There must be progress on the Palestinian issue, otherwise it would be extremely difficult for the Malaysian Government to come out openly with unconditional support for the West.

"After all, Umno is dependent on its constituents and they can still be swayed if it does not play its cards wisely.

"Pas is ever ready to move in and exploit the Malay anguish."

He said if BN played its cards shrewdly, the Opposition could lose all the ground that it had gained except in Kelantan and Terengganu.

These two States, he stressed, would remain under Pas because there was no political will and vision on the part of Umno leaders to improve the situation there.

To a question by Asli chief executive officer Datuk Michael Yeoh, at the dialogue session, Abdullah said Umno could sustain its gains provided that the economy held and also depending on international developments.

Asked by Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia's deputy secretary-general Datuk David Chua for his reading of the non-Malay electorate, Abdullah said he believed that they would deliver the votes.

He said this was particularly so for the Chinese, despite internal problems in the MCA, because the community would not support Pas.

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