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Crucial test for Kedah Umno

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A FORMER Kedah Assemblyman had never expected his presence at the Royal Malaysian Air Force base in Subang last Wednesday to welcome Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad from a holiday abroad to be turned into an issue by his detractors.

It would not have been an issue, he believed, if his name had not appeared in the newspapers as an Umno candidate for one of the seats in the two by-elections to be held in Kedah on July 18.

His accusers claimed he was lobbying the party's top leaders for the seat despite being aware that it was an exceptional ceremony to welcome Dr Mahathir after his shocking announcement at last month's Umno general assembly of his intention to resign from all posts.

Kedah Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain could be in a denial mode but on the ground, the lobbying is intense among the division leaders.

The worst is the Kuala Kedah division which he leads. At least five candidates are jostling to be the candidate for the Anak Bukit State seat.

In Pendang, it appears to be a toss-up between Pendang division chief Datuk Othman Abdul, the vanquished in the 1999 general election, and Youth chief Najamuddin Darus.

Othman lost to late Pas president Datuk Fadzil Md Noor with a majority of 2,934 votes.

There's no doubt Umno has been down this road before.

The by-elections for the Pendang parliamentary and Anak Bukit State seats have never been this crucial for Umno and the Barisan Nasional.

If Kedah Umno succeeds in wresting the seats from Pas, according to a senior Umno leader, it will give the impression that Kedah Umno is well organised or has recovered from the 1999 setback.

"If it fails, then don't expect anything from Kedah Umno in the next general election," he said.

He expects the outcome of the two by-elections to also have an effect on the outcome of the next general election.

"We have been told that Umno and BN are very popular now. I cannot imagine the results of these two by-elections giving a different picture," he said.

"It is interesting to see the effects of the by-elections on Umno politics as they come almost immediately after Dr Mahathir announced that he would stay on no longer than October 2003. Will it be a sweet parting gift for the Umno president?" asked another observer.

The by-elections are the second test of Syed Razak's leadership. He lost the first on Nov 29, 2000, when the BN lost its two-thirds majority after Parti Keadilan Nasional won the Lunas State by-election.

Will Kedah Umno survive the "green tide" which saw Pas taking eight of the 13 parliamentary seats and 12 of the 36 State seats in the 1999 general election?

To be fair to Syed Razak, Kedah Umno was in disarray when he took over from his predecessor.

"The sidelining of the second echelon leaders and witch-hunt led to the downfall of Kedah Umno in 1999," said a former Kedah Assemblyman.

"The key to Kedah Umno's success is to get the right and credible candidate."

If Othman becomes the Umno candidate for Pendang, it would be the fifth

time he is standing for the seat.

He won in 1986 (with a majority of 900 votes), 1990 (3,205) and 1995 (1,933) before losing the seat in 1999.

Umno knows getting the right candidates for the two by-elections is important.

But how can they gauge whether a person is a right candidate for the seat?

A local Umno member in Pendang said the party leadership should not make a mistake committed in the past by listening to one source in gauging the support for a certain candidate.

His concern is that the feedback given to the party leaders on the potential candidate could be orchestrated and one-sided.

If this happens, Umno will be split and certain factions would decline to co-operate to ensure a BN victory.

"I think it is crucial for Umno to be a bit more cautious and thorough in selecting the right candidate because there are many things at stake in these by-elections," he said.

While Othman could be given another chance in Pendang, the Umno leadership may decide to look beyond the existing list of candidates.

If Umno is thinking about regenerating itself, it may decide on a younger candidate. The same applies to the Anak Bukit seat.