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Deliverance from poverty or accepting spiritual values

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WHEN he arrived at the Kedah Pas headquarters on Tuesday, Teregganu Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang looked resplendent in a grey overcoat worn over his white robe.

There was an air of importance, of power and confidence, which he never appeared to exude before he took over the party's helm following the death of president Datuk Fadzil Noor on June 23.

Hadi has definitely come home to roost.

Comfortably responding to questions from journalists on Pas' chances in the by-elections, there was only one moment when he chose to evade a question and instead gave a reply which was not related.

He was asked if the by-elections would be a test of his leadership and Hadi's reply revealed some underlying discomfort he felt over perceptions on his ascension to the Pas presidency.

"Many have written that the late president was a moderate and I am an extremist. It is not true. Our party has its policies which leaders implement."

Much as Hadi may choose to give an answer of his choice, the fact remains, both Pas and Umno are watching him closely and the by-elections will definitely be used to gauge his popularity.

In many ways, the Pendang and Anak Bukit by-elections deal with several firsts in the context of Malay politics and the parties involved.

Both paths of Umno and Pas are intertwined in these by-elections.

For Umno and BN, it will be its first by-election test since the 1999 general election in constituencies belonging to the opposition.

From Sanggang to Ketari, Umno and BN had been defending seats they won in the last election.

Said an Umno leader from Malacca:

"We have been claiming that the Malay votes had swung to us everytime we won the other by-elections especially in last two, Indera Kayangan and Ketari.

"However, if we cannot win, or at least reduce the majority won by Pas in the two seats in the last general election, our claims will be negated and morale which had been growing among Umno members will take a downturn."

For Umno, winning the Anak Bukit state seat will ensure its Kedah Government regains the two-thirds majority in the State assembly.

Winning Pendang will further boost Umno's confidence of venturing into the next general election.

To give the process a sentimental touch, winning the two seats will be a fitting tribute for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who had announced his intention to resign next year.

Apart from depriving the Kedah Government its two-thirds majority if it retains Anak Bukit, winning both seats will boost its confidence of realising its dream of taking the State in the next general election.

While these are the considerations for both Umno and Pas, issues which are expected to dominate the by-elections will be hudud and policies on education which affects the Malays.

For starters, Umno's choice of candidates was made an issue by Pas.

A senior writer of Harakah, the Pas official newsletter, insisted that the newspapers should write that it is a battle between old faces and new faces.

While such issue can be trivialised by Umno, it cannot ignore the move by Pas to introduce hudud in Terengganu.

To a Johor Umno Youth member, questioning the Pas hudud may backfire.

"We are dealing with a rural community which, through relentless Pas' propoganda had made the party leaders and their political Islam almost like sacred cows which cannot be disputed."

This is something which Hadi concurs, saying if Umno decides to use hudud as an issue to attack Pas, the strategy may backfire.

An Umno party worker campaigning in Anak Bukit shared his frustrations over the manner by-elections had evolved, the present ones included.

"It seems Pas can go on promoting their ideology, policies and visions.

"But when it comes to basic necessities, they will turn to us. From my experience, such an attitude is not only in States controlled by BN but it even prevails in Kelantan and Terengganu which is under Pas rule."

On one hand, he said it proved that the Malays believed that Umno is the party which can deliver them from poverty, difficulties and shortcomings.

"On the other, Pas seems to be the one to deliver the spiritual values."

His discomfort is actually a monster, if it can be called one, of Umno's own creation. It has been in the forefront promising development.

The fact that the Malays have accepted that Umno can deliver is, in many ways, an acknowledgement and recognition of its worth.

But, as in any success, there is a downside that Umno has to face.

Pas, on the other hand, is only playing to its strength or what it sees as an opportunity to position itself as an alternative to Umno.

To the Malays, Umno is about worldly comfort. To them, true or otherwise, Pas will provide the spiritual deliverance.

It is then not surprising to see Hadi with such air of confidence.

For he smiles as he watches Umno struggling to manage its success.