

14/07/2002

All about choice of candidates

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PAS' choice of by-election headquarters at the Madrasah An Nur Al Islamiah religious school in Gajah Mati, Pendang, tells an interesting tale.

Schools such as these had been the main supplier of the party's cadre system.

The existence of several religious schools in Pendang and Anak Bukit was cited by acting Pas president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang as a factor which will ensure his party's victory in the by-elections.

What Hadi had said is not far from the truth. The very existence of Pas is based on the continuous supply of cadres and future leaders from such schools and that is not only confined to Pendang and Anak Bukit, but also to other parts of the Malay States.

In fact, Pas seeds were originally sown at the El-Ehya As-Sharif religious school in Gunung Semanggol, in Perak during the colonial era and the tradition had never stopped and, to a certain degree, flourished. For that matter, Pas had not stopped merely at the religious schools.

Products from these schools have proceeded to expand the party's ideology in institutions of higher learning, be they local or abroad.

Their cadre system has been perfected to a degree whereby, not only religious students were roped in, but also those pursuing professional courses.

It was actually not surprising when the political crisis of 1998 erupted, university students were in the forefront fighting Umno and the Federal Government.

Umno may be instrumental in the setting up of most institutions of higher learning and responsible in providing Malay students the opportunities to study there. With that, the party may believe that these students will always look at Umno as their saviour, feel indebted and will, upon the completion of their studies, support its struggles.

It was not to be as the Pas cadre system had penetrated most of these institutions. With that, Umno's re-generation process, which should have come naturally, spluttered.

Back in Pendang and Anak Bukit, where the microcosm of the whole process is occurring, much as Pas may feel comforted by the existence of these schools, Umno does not seem too perturbed.

Said an aide to deputy Umno president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who is spearheading Umno/Barisan Nasional's campaign in the by-elections:

"Much as teachers of these schools are perceived to be staunch supporters of Pas today, many of them were pupils of Abdullah's grandfather Syeikh Abdullah Ibrahim or better known as Syeikh Abdullah Fahim.

"Syeikh Abdullah Fahim was among the pioneers in setting up these schools in the constituencies at the turn of the century until pre-independence.

"Some of the school principals and teachers had studied under him."

With that, the scale was balanced, if not tipped, towards Umno and Pak Lah as the Deputy Prime Minister is affectionately referred to. However, the fact remains, these schools and others like them elsewhere, will continue to be Pas' source of party cadres as well as the main contributor to its re-generation process.

This is what Umno seems to be lacking in despite being in power for almost five decades.

As pointed out by a local Umno Youth member:

"Even in terms of choosing candidates, top Umno leaders do not seem to be interested in the re-generation process."

His grouse was over the choice of candidates. For Pendang, Umno again opted for Datuk Othman Abdul who was defeated in 1999 and had been an MP for four terms before that.

For Anak Bukit, Umno chose Datuk Zakaria Said, a three-term Assemblyman and one-term MP until he was dropped in the 1999 general election.

Pas, on the other hand, has fielded Dr Mohd Hayati Othman, 45, a first-timer, for Pendang.

For Anak Bukit, Pas is banking on Amiruddin Hamzah, 40, a qualified engineer who lost in Langkawi in the 1999 general election.

The Umno Youth member argued his case further:

"It is not like our candidates are in the league of Dr Mahathir (Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) that they become indispensable."

In fact, immediately after nomination day, Pas leaders and members went on to crow about their candidates, pointing out that Umno had opted for discards.

Pas central committee member Mohamed Sabu was one who gloated about Pas candidates being young professionals.

"People say that Pas is a party Pak Lebai (conservative and traditional Malay mullahs). But look, this Pak Lebai party can field young professionals.

"But Umno... It is fielding candidates of Nordin Ahmad's era (a popular Malay actor of the 1960s/1970s) who are fit to act in Panggilan Pulau (a popular Malay movie of the 1950s with P. Ramlee as the main actor)."

Such condescending remarks are only expected from Mohamed who is currently being widely criticised for using profanities and resorting to crude name-calling of government leaders.

But political analyst Dr Vincent Lim, who was in Pendang and Anak Bukit, feels that, while Pas can afford to field professional and young candidates, Umno has its own tradition to observe.

"Pas is an ideological-driven party and with that, candidates are of no consequence.

"But Umno's tradition has always been one which takes into account local sensitivities and needs.

"There is actually an advantage to field seasoned politicians who know the finer details of the constituency they represent."

On this, Mohamed concurred, saying, as far as he was concerned, choice of candidates for his party only carries a five per cent influence on voters, especially in rural constituencies.

Umno had acknowledged this fact for a long time, especially in States like Kelantan or constituencies noted to be Pas' strongholds.

In Kelantan, for example, there is a popular saying among Umno members that even if a tree stump is placed as a candidate, as long as it contested under the Pas ticket, it would win.

While Umno has to deal with this reality, a party campaigner from Malacca pointed out why it was wise to opt for the two candidates though they were considered having outlived their usefulness.

"Othman is the division head. Even though he was defeated in 1999, we all accept that it was not due to his lack of popularity but rather Pas was riding the Anwar Ibrahim wave then.

"Furthermore, Umno's political intrigues at the divisional level are not something easy to deal with. Put a newcomer and others in the divisional ranks may just decide to sabotage him.

"Given his lack of experience, he may just end up being slaughtered by Umno itself, long before Pas can get to him."

Similarly, he argued, with the case of Zakaria, Umno's candidate for Anak Bukit.

"He had served the constituency for three terms before and he should know the place well."

Despite these arguments, there are still some in Umno, especially the younger generation, who feel that until and unless the top leaders are prepared to opt for young blood, the re-generation process in Umno will not take place.

But a fan of Umno tradition does not believe parliamentary or State elections or by-elections is the place for such re-generation to be conducted.

"It should be during party elections, especially at the divisional level.

"If the divisions feel that the leaders need to be replaced by young blood, then they should do it. Then, the top leaders have no choice but to choose candidates from among the new faces."

On that score, Umno members should not fret about the re-generation, or rather the lack of it, in the party.

They should also not fret too much about the description of Mohamed that Umno candidates are only suited for Malay movies of the 1950s.

After all, present-day Malay movie actors are accused of depending too much on looks and glamorous lifestyles, unlike those of the past, like Nordin Ahmad or P. Ramlee, who were truly talented.

The only thing that should be nagging them is that P. Ramlee and Nordin Ahmad started very young. They became legends much later.

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