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Manan and Dr Mahathir shaping the people's destiny their way

Ahmad A. Talib

MANAN had just taken over as the chief of an Umno branch in a small village in south Perak. He took over from the village chief, the Tok Empat, who was chairman for more than 30 years.

A changing of the guard at the small village is hardly noticed, and any debate on the matter is confined only to the roti canai shop. Given the indifference of villagers to politics, Manan found that he actually inherited a branch with only RM17 in the kitty and no plans whatsoever for the future.

He wrote me a letter asking to meet. When we did, just before the Anak Bukit and Pendang by-elections over a week ago, Manan spoke of the mega challenges facing him. His biggest was - how to get the villagers excited about national development so that they can participate.

In his early 50s, and with a healthy middle spread, the former business executive now resides in the village tending to his orchard and other kampung chores. It appeared that he is now devoting his life to the orchard, kampung and the Umno branch he now leads - not necessarily in that order, he said.

Manan was full of enthusiasm with his new challenges, particularly in trying to get the kampung folk to wake up from the long, long slumber and move with the times. This is easier said than done, he later admitted.

The kampung boasts some of the finest durians, mangosteens, petai and has a big supply of pulasan. For years, they have tended to their orchard well but there has been no improvement in the marketing of their farm produce.

Middlemen will collect the fruits not far from Manan's family home and cart them away cheaply. If there's a bumper crop, then the fruits fetch very low prices, depriving the kampung folk of one of the main sources of income.

For those who live near a fast-flowing, cold river further into the village, they have set up stalls selling food and drinks to weekend visitors.

Manan wants to help change all this. He sees vast potential in the village. The North-South Expressway has brought the village closer to the city and whatever opportunities thereof; new roads leading to the village has made travelling to the nearest town, Tanjong Malim, much faster; and the expansion of the Sultan Idris teaching universiti nearby is sure to generate new businesses for those who can see the opportunities.

And Manan says, that is the key to the kampung's prosperity - the ability to see and seize opportunities. As an Umno member, Manan draws inspiration from Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Prime Minister and Umno president. While Dr Mahathir took over the country's leadership in his 50s, Manan had just taken over his branch, also in his 50s.

Manan didn't feel that it was too late to contribute. "I came back to this kampung to lead. I didn't push the previous branch chief out. He felt that it was high time he left and allow younger people to take over. I want to do something for the people, even in small ways."

Manan faces some tough times ahead, especially when the kampung folk seem indifferent to the changes around them. His immediate tasks would be to rally the folks behind the branch and form a road map to guide them forward.

Syabas and good luck, Manan.

