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Shadow play in Umno politics

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EVERYTIME some political intrigue brews in Kelantan, a popular reaction would be: "Ah, another wayang kulit (shadow play)."

Ironically, wayang kulit, a Kelantan legacy, was banned by the Pas Government in 1991 on the grounds that it was against the teachings of Islam.

Even then, the ban on wayang kulit was suspiciously viewed to be laced with political considerations.

Pas insisted that wayang kulit performances had to be banned because the rituals performed by the Tok Dalang (puppet master) included that of worshipping.

Umno leaders in Kelantan had then opposed the ban on wayang kulit, claiming that the Pas leaders were unhappy because most of the Tok Dalang were sympathetic to their party and some of their story lines reflected that.

No matter what, the ban on wayang kulit was partially enforced and its performances were restricted to foreign tourists and conducted in select places.

But yesterday, the Pas Government of Kelantan reportedly decided to set up a committee to review the ban on wayang kulit in view of the interest in it.

Its Social Unity, Tourism and Non-Governmental Organisations Committee chairman Anuar Tan Abdullah said the committee would look at how to make wayang kulit conform to Islamic teachings.

Alas, it is an irony of irony, for the decision is nothing more than another political wayang kulit performed in the interest of wayang kulit itself.

Amid all these attempts to subjugate the wayang kulit performances, Kelantan politicians, from both sides of the divide, were themselves trying to be Tok Dalang (puppet master), though many ended up being the puppet.

Whenever there is a political intrigue or powerplay, the common question that arises is, who is the Tok Dalang?

Similarly, in the recent case highlighted by the New Straits Times on Friday about 12 of the 14 Umno division heads in Kelantan wanting the party's State leadership to be changed.

It seemed these division heads were of the opinion that five office-bearers, namely State Umno chief Datuk Mustapa Mohamad, secretary Datuk Ahmad Rusli Ibrahim, treasurer Datuk Dr Nik Hussain Abdul Rahman, information chief Mohd Noor Deris and executive secretary Mohd Nawawi Yaacob were ineffective.

To them, as long as the current office-bearers held their positions, Umno Kelantan would not be able to weaken Pas' grip on the State which is going into its 12th year.

It was learnt, with the exception of Mustapa, who is Jeli division head, and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah of Gua Musang, all the other 12 division heads and the Kelantan Umno Wanita chief were present during the informal meeting held at the residence of Kuala Krai division head Datuk Wan Zaid Wan Abdullah.

After the story appeared in the NST, numerous quarters denied that such a meeting was held to discuss changes in the State leadership.

However, some of the division heads who made such denials in public, in

private contended that they do feel that Mustapa's leadership is ineffective.

In the same breath, they, however, insisted that it was not that Mustapa was a bad leader.

"He is too nice. We do not want his image tercalar (to be tarnished)," said one of the division heads.

Then, within the same conversation, the division head then said:

"In Kelantan, we are the opposition. We are at war and we need a pahlawan to lead us. That is the consensus."

While these are unfurling, the grapevine is tingling with theories of whose hand is behind it all.

However, despite the focus on who is the Tok Dalang, the whole episode cannot be anything else other than a vintage political wayang kulit of the Kelantan kind.

In retrospect, after Umno lost Kelantan to the combined might of Pas and Semangat 46 in the 1990 general election, the State Umno was placed directly under the stewardship of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself.

He held the State Umno chief post for almost 10 years and relinquished it to Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah just a few months before the 1999 general election.

After the general election and after Umno fared badly in Kelantan, the State Umno leadership was entrusted to Mustapa.

The general feeling at that time was that he was the best choice.

To most, Mustapa is a good man in every sense of the word.

He is considered Mr Clean, hardworking, trustworthy, a good image and a figure Umno badly needed especially after the battering it took after the 1998 political crisis.

His image was used to the hilt. Apart from leading Kelantan Umno, Mustapa was also made Umno information chief at national level as well as the executive director of National Economic Action Council (NEAC), a government think-tank.

With such credentials, it is surprising that the Kelantan Umno division heads would want Mustapa to go.

If anything, Kelantan Umno, including the division heads, should actually be glad to have Mustapa to lend them some credibility in which, on their own, they would be deemed as "have beens" or worse, unscrupulous politicians.

The division heads realise this, hence the reason why they, despite clearly wanting a change in the leadership, are not prepared to attack Mustapa.

Their standard reply when asked about Mustapa had always been:

"It is not that we do not want him. It is just that he is too nice, making him unsuitable to handle the dog fight of Kelantan politics."

It is obvious, for their own good, these division leaders realised that any attempt on their part to discredit Mustapa will only bounce back on them.

That being the case, why did they even think of changing the Kelantan Umno leadership?

The reasons are simple.

It all started in December last year when Kelantan Umno deputy chief Datuk Annuar Musa offered to relinquish his post.

Annuar made the offer because he was caught in the controversy surrounding the misappropriation of funds in the Hardcore Poor Programme and he believed he should not drag Kelantan Umno into it.

Then, a couple of months back, news started going back to the division heads that Mustapa had also offered to give up the State Umno chief post.

To them, since there was such a situation, in which the top two State

Umno leaders had offered to give up their posts, then they should take the opportunity to figure out who best to take over and how the direction of the State Umno should be shaped.

However, the question now is who told them that Mustapa wanted to give up his State Umno chief post?

Another question that begs an answer is: Is it true that Mustapa plans to give up his post?

If there is no truth that Mustapa wanted to quit, then the one who brought up the issue can very well be the Tok Dalang to the whole episode.

However, if it is true that Mustapa had offered to give up his post, then, the division heads had not committed any sins, other than being opportunists. That is not a crime in so far as politics is concerned.

Yet, if these division heads had been misled or had allowed themselves to be misled over Mustapa's plans, then, they are either puppets or dreaming to be the puppet master.

Either way, Mustapa has been trying to downplay the whole issue.

It is understandable as he cannot afford to be seen as lacking control over the State Umno he is supposed to lead.

But at the same time, it is probably time Mustapa truly considered concentrating on his Jeli division. He lost the parliamentary seat in 1999 with a meagre 693 majority.

He should also realise if the division heads believe that being too nice is not a strength, then he should probably let those who are less nice to manage themselves.

And surely, by now, Mustapa knows that these are all part of the political wayang kulit played by Kelantan politicians.

Since he is truly a nice person, the only thing Mustapa may never know - is he their puppet or Tok Dalang?

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