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Pas forced on the defensive

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I'VE learned to become a good Malay and simultaneously, a good Malaysian. Actually, it's the same thing, if taken in the right context. What's important is the spirit - not how I describe myself, but what I do.

Like a lot of people, we are all good Malaysians, whatever our racial origins may be. Cross-border or inter-State marriages have been common since the end of the Second World War.

I have a special connection with Alor Star - I got married there 33 years ago. And until my parents-in-law died, Alor Star was a second home; the first being Kota Baru, although my family lived 90 per cent of our lives in Kuala Lumpur and more than a decade altogether in London and New York.

Alor Star is a sleepy capital in normal circumstances, but it has been a lively place since canvassing and campaigning for the Anak Bukit State and Pendang Parliamentary by-elections began.

Today, there may already be several thousand "outsiders" thronging the roads of Alor Star to cheer their respective candidates and to hear the results of the polls tomorrow evening. I expect a thousand and more to join me tomorrow. I arrived yesterday.

I have to stay in Kangar, 50km away, because I can't get a room even in a lodging house in Alor Star. I spent several hours yesterday touring Anak Bukit and Pendang, with both sides claiming they will win. However, independent observers told me "its fairer to say it's still anyone's game".

It does seem that Pas is on the retreat. The Prime Minister's visit on Monday did help the Barisan Nasional. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is a badge of moderation, hence personal attacks on him have increased and will be intensified before polling.

I feel with a bit of luck BN should be able to regain either one of the two seats and with a lot of blessings, hard work and the sincere commitment of everyone in the battle, both.

Yesterday evening, many pictures of Dr Mahathir were distributed, one wearing shorts and T-shirt (instead of trousers) while taking exercise, implying that no Muslim leader should be wearing shorts, least of all a caliph (mocking him as a self-described caliph).

Besides Dr Mahathir, Puteri Umno came under special attack, with incidences of indecent exposure and other obscene acts. Posters bearing pictures of Dr Mahathir, Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat (Kelantan Menteri Besar and Pas spiritual leader) and Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain (Kedah Menteri Besar) are everywhere, eclipsing the pictures of the four candidates, which makes it seem as if they were the candidates.

Yesterday, I saw a series of visions of Puteri Umno being accosted by Pas' young supporters, in Pendang in particular, where the body perspires more rapidly and the scorching sun beams strongly in the humid atmosphere. I at first felt sceptical about the value of a trip to Pendang. But I had to go so that I could write tales when I returned to Kuala Lumpur.

The results will be crucial to both Umno and Pas. The pressure is more intense on Pas because the Anak Bukit and Pendang seats were held by its late president, Datuk Fadzil Noor. Losing both would be suicidal; even the loss of one, Anak Bukit, which is probable, would be bad - it will dent the party's grand design to capture the Kedah Government in 2003 or 2004.

For Umno, it must win one at least, to give credence to its claim of

political recovery among the Malays. Both constituencies are heavily Malay. Syed Razak will have to deliver to redeem himself after the debacle in Lunas.

If he succeeds in regaining the two seats, Syed Razak will be the toast of the nation. I wish him well. It's not an impossible task.

A top Pas leader told me, on condition of anonymity, that "the party is under great stress. The BN onslaught is tremendous. We are defending every inch of our territory. Fight we will, street-by-street, lorong-by-lorong (lane-by-lane), kampung-by-kampung, and house-by-house. With a bit of luck, we'll retain both seats even with a reduced majority." He has worked harder than in any previous by-election, adding, "a defeat here is a major disaster".

Pas' sustainable style as always is to campaign crassly. Any approach will be employed, perverted and prostituted to the purpose of electioneering. It will blast Umno in no uncertain terms. In Pendang and Anak Bukit, it is Umno's stand on hudud and, surprise, surprise, Umno's and the Government's policy on the use of English in schools.

Pas denounced the Government's intention to introduce English for the teaching of Mathematics and Science subjects, alleging that Umno leaders are "dishonouring" the national language!

I can't believe that Pas - which wants to abolish Malay privileges and special position (that includes the protection of the Malay language) to attract non-Malay voters and its erstwhile ally the DAP - is now spinning a fictional hatred for English among the rural folk, no longer an innocent community, really.

As the Prime Minister said, Pas has no moral standing to champion the Malay language, as it had never really fought for its advancement.

Dr Mahathir stressed that Pas was simply trying to hoodwink the voters. Well, Pas is known to prefer Arabic replacing English initially, before it takes on Malay. The party's policy is clear: an Islamic theocratic state a la Pas and the first language shall be Arabic.

Pas is appealing only to the narrowest segment of the electorate. The voters know that English is not replacing Malay. In any event, it is only to be used in two subjects. And, perhaps, when English Literature is introduced in future.

All Malaysians here agree that Malay shall always be the national and sole official language.

There is no quarrel over this; it's a settled issue. What we want is simply that, while we promote the national language, we musn't neglect English as we did in the past, for which we are now paying the cost.

I made it clear in the New Sunday Times editorial that lack of English and negotiating skills can sell the country short. Would you want that? Malaysians need to articulate their place in the world. What language can accomplish it better than English?

Let me return to Pendang and Anak Bukit. Umno has a better chance of wresting at least a seat if it concentrates on house-to-house visits; this can be devastating for the Opposition in Anak Bukit. Things are looking good for BN, even in Pendang. Intimidation, terror, use of profanity and divine threats rise in inverse proportion to Pas' electoral fortunes.

I know communications technology has only made it easier to reach the electorate, but it is no substitute for the personal touch and relationship. Personal visits empower candidates! The linkage between the candidates and the voters is established early, and this is the absolute essence of politics.

Many voters, while showing greater disdain for parties than ever before, are attracted to the personal qualities of the candidates.

They should be diligently courted by the candidates and the party. Umno

candidates Datuk Zakaria Said and Datuk Othman Abdul have the distinct advantage of previously having served the voters here, while Amiruddin Hamzah and Dr Mohd Hayati Othman are relatively new faces in Kedah politics.

It is a waste of time, energy and money to woo those who have openly stated their party preference or affiliation because they, in the Malay context, vote consistently according to party instructions.

The results may show, one way or another, that the political situation in Kedah has altered little.

The results should be in BN's favour, really. No new issues, such as those in 1999, have appeared to energise and mobilise strong public opinion. Perhaps, this will cause many to change their previous allegiance.

Tomorrow will be so many things to many voters. God has presented them with an opportunity to exchange symbolism for practical politics. Let them take one step at a time.