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Rejuvenation for Kelantan Umno must come from within to make a mark

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KELANTAN has a spanking new airport in Pengkalan Chepa.

The RM55 million Sultan Ismail Petra Airport seems to greet incoming as well as outgoing travellers with a confusing intent.

On one side, for a State reportedly suffering from poverty due to the alleged lack of administrative skills among the Pas leadership, the massive and beautiful gateway deflects such claims.

On the other, the airport stands as a monumental edifice to disprove accusations by Pas leaders that the Federal Government has been denying and sabotaging development for Kelantan.

The presence of, and what the new airport stands for, was noted by a Kubang Kerian Umno division leader who said:

"We have Kelantanese proudly saying that even Alor Star does not have such a beautiful airport."

The comparison with Alor Star is obvious - it is the home State of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. And if the Prime Minister's home State could not have such an airport while Kelantan, under Pas, has one, why bother about wanting Umno to rule the State again?

Of course there are numerous reasons as to why the Kelantan airport was upgraded.

It is required given the volume of travellers, especially during the Hajj season, and that it caters not only to Kelantanese but also people from Terengganu as well as Thai nationals living in the southern provinces.

The point is that, Kelantan Umno is in dire straits.

It had been so after it lost the State to the combined efforts of Pas and Semangat 46 in the 1990 general election.

National Umno leaders tried to inject their support to the extent of making no less than Dr Mahathir himself as the State Umno liaison chief almost immediately after the 1990 election.

Dr Mahathir only relinquished the post before the 1999 general election, handing over the task to Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah who, ironically, had been the person said to be responsible for Umno's loss a decade earlier, when he was then the president of Semangat.

But the 1999 election was a watershed in Malay politics and that did not apply only to Kelantan but in other Malay-dominated States, which saw Terengganu becoming the east coast belt under Pas while the position of Kedah and Perlis was quite precarious.

After the 1999 general election, defeated Jeli MP Datuk Mustapa Mohamed, one of the rising stars of Umno politics, was made the party State chief.

He was expected to use his good, clean and decent image as well as hardworking nature to mould the State Umno to be a force able to break the grip of Kelantan Pas under the leadership of Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat.

Observers believe that before Mustapa can mould the State Umno, he has to look at the weaknesses and strengths of Kelantan Pas.

It does make sense especially after the bravado and confidence exuded by the State Umno of their ability to win back the State in the last couple of elections.

For one, despite attempts by Kelantan Umno to rejuvenate itself by having Mustapa and several other new faces, the State Pas had managed to outdo its opponent.

While most believe that Nik Aziz is the driving force for Pas in Kelantan, the party has ensured the emergence of exciting young

politicians to the fore.

Names like Kubang Kerian MP Husam Musa, Melor Assemblyman Wan Ismail Wan Jusoh, State Exco Takiyuddin Hassan and Pulai Chondong Assemblyman Zulkifli Mamat have managed to change public perception of Pas being led by conservative and orthodox mullahs.

Kelantan Umno, to its credit, had in the last few years managed to remould itself with veteran leaders of the 1990 debacle sidelined in place of new division heads.

Gone are the likes of Tan Sri Hussein Ahmad of Rantau Panjang, Tan Sri Mohamed Yaacob of Tanah Merah, Datuk Ariffin Abdul Hamid of Pengkalan Chepa, Datuk Ahmad Rastom Ahmad Maher of Kota Baru and Mohamed Jelani Jaafar of Pasir Putih, to name a few.

However, in their midst are several other long-serving division heads and despite having lost in a couple of elections, either for parliamentary or State seats, are still eyeing for a seat in the next round.

"Oghe doh muok doh (the people are tired of seeing the same people)," is a remark by a Kelantan Umno member who felt that those who had been rejected twice in the last two elections should not be renominated for the next one.

A Federal Umno leader said there are able new Umno names in their midst in the likes of Zaid Ibrahim who had taken over the Kota Baru Umno chief post and newly-appointed Tenaga Nasional Bhd chairman Datuk Dr Awang Adek Hussin, who is a Bachok boy.

"That is to name a few. There are notable Kelantanese who can make Umno in the State exciting."

But the problem of getting these people to the fore, which means going through contests for divisional posts and later having to contend with sidelined divisional leaders, makes the whole process quite unpalatable.

"It is not so much of having to participate in grassroot politics as these individuals too do not want to be viewed as parachute candidates.

"It is having to contend with the culture of peteh keting (a Kelantan term which means to sabotage)," said a new Kelantan Umno player.

"In short, even if the newcomer is successful in getting to the division's top posts, he will have to face the sabotage from the former head who is not renominated."

Rejuvenation for Kelantan Umno, must come from within.

If leaders who had been rejected, not once but twice or more, are not prepared to gracefully leave the arena and extend their support to the new faces as how they were supported before, then the State Umno will continue to be in limbo.

It is then not surprising that even a new airport can be its enemy.