

30 JUL 2003
Politics-Kedah (News Analysis)
HOW STRONG IS UMNO IN KEDAH?

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KUALA LUMPUR: Kedah is one of the heartlands of the Malays and is much talked about as a state that might fall into the hands of PAS in the coming election.

This view is constantly proclaimed by the opposition party along with its on theories and postulations.

But records have shown otherwise. Since independence, Kedah has never been captured by PAS, unlike Kelantan dan Terengganu, which had fallen into PAS clutches twice before.

That victories had certainly made them more determined to capture Kedah now.

To Umno and the Barisan Nasional (BN), the 1999 results were a wake-up call and they had since then gone all out to ensure that the home state of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad do not fall to PAS.

The BN has described the PAS ambition of capturing Kedah as a difficult one to achieve, while Menteri Besar Kedah Syed Razak Syed Zain sees it as "day-dreaming".

PAS IS CONFIDENT

Whatever the perceptions, Acting PAS president who is also the Menteri Besar of Terengganu, Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, is full of confidence that the opposition party will fulfill its ambition in Kedah.

For a clearer picture, Bernama went to interview former Menteri Besar Tan Sri Osman Aroff and several other state leaders for their assessment of the situation in the rice-bowl state which has 1.24 million Malays, 241,000 Chinese, and more than 116,000 Indians. The other minorities, mainly Thais, totalled less than 26,000.

A veteran politician who had beaten off the previous PAS challenge for Kedah, Osman said, "The truth is PAS has no strength in the state, even before now. If PAS were to win, it would have already won (the state)."

He, however, admitted that whatever the weaknesses or disunity within Umno, they would go to add to PAS strength.

Nevertheless, Osman is confident that Umno is still strong in the state because the people's support, blessing and belief in the party are still intact.

Osman who was the "mastermind" in burying the PAS ambition in Kedah for so long that he was the Menteri Besar, had left Umno and the BN in pole position. Until the 1999 general election, PAS could only win two of the 36 state seats (that is, Sala and Bukit Raya). The BN had a clean sweep of the 15 parliamentary seats.

HOPE TURNS FEVERISH

The scenario changed in 1999 when PAS took 12 of the 36 state seats and eight of the 15 parliamentary seats. The victories had fuelled the party's hope which turns feverish as the next election looms near.

The state opposition added one more state seat to their tally when Parti Keadilan Nasional won the Lunas by-election in November, 2000.

The BN snatched one parliamentary seat back when it won the Pendang by-election, while PAS retained the Anak Bukit state seat. Both by-elections came about following the demise of PAS president Datuk Fadzil Noor last year.

"Like Umno, PAS is also riddled with its own problems. What is

important is that Umno must overcome its internal problem cleverly so as to create unity within the party," said Osman.

He described what is happening in Kedah now as a dilemma of leadership confidence after receiving heavy flaks from different quarters.

BE OPEN-MINDED OVER CRITICISMS

Osman said as a leader sitting in a "hot seat" (like the Menteri Besar), he would be exposed to criticisms which he must take in his stride and with an open mind.

What is important is that he must study and evaluate the criticisms as positive advice which he could follow up with suitable actions.

For Osman, honesty and understanding are vital in a party struggle. But what is a problem is that while "we support unity, we do not do it at the same time."

As such, he urged all Umno members and leaders including the Youth, Wanita and Puteri to give their undivided support, regardless of who the leader is.

"There will be pettiness, but what is important is the strong support and spirit of the struggle of the Umno people, only then would the outsiders and general society look up to Umno," he said.

For example, Osman said, if the people were looking for a place for shelter they would look for a huge healthy tree and if Umno is split and weak, they would look for another party.

"The rakyat can see all that Umno had achieved and they cannot deny the realities, including the development sector," he said, referring to the progress and developments in the state and country.

Osman said the "fence-sitters" who had deserted must also be brought back and this effort would require the commitment of all the party leaders and members.

STRATEGIES IN TUNE WITH THE TIMES

"Umno must adopt new approaches, arrangements and strategies to suit the times so as to strengthen the party," he said.

Osman is confident that Umno Kedah can handle any form of challenges if it has the full support of its members and leaders.

The new secretary of the Umno state liaison committee, Datuk Abdul Rahman Ariffin, said his first effort to strengthen Umno Kedah is with the launching of the "Umno Berkampung" (or Umno in the Kampung) programme in the Padang Serai Umno division last July 11-12.

He said Umno Kedah would launch the programme in every division in order to foster closer ties between the local people and the party.

Under the programme, social activities are the focus, like "nasyid" and "marhaban", review of the electoral rolls and friendship gatherings with the Menteri Besar, ministers or deputy ministers.

He said while they concentrate on constituencies which they had won, Umno's target is the opposition strongholds and how they can win back these people.

The reactions to the "Umno Berkampung" programme and other activities had shown that party unity is being restored and strengthened, he added.

Head of the Umno Padang Terap division, Datuk Ghazali Ibrahim, said the people's support for Umno in the area is very good and encouraging.

He said for example, right after the last general election, some people in the constituency refused to shake hands with him when met at functions like weddings and funerals.

"But the situation has changed. I am now treated as usual at these functions," he said.

THIRD PARTY OBSERVATIONS

Political observers feel that the Umno results of the last general election were unexpected and were probably caused by some "sensitive" mistakes.

One factor (for the losses) that is difficult to deny is the choice of many of the Umno candidates who were not suitable and who did not have the blessings of the divisions and branches alike.

They also said as a result of the incessant psychological warfare currently mounted by the opposition, the Umno leaders and members were sometimes seen to be "panicking".

"This type of scenario, if allowed to persist, would undermine the credibility and the fighting spirit of Umno and its leaders in the eyes of the people," said one of the observers.

They concluded that with the new resolve and leadership changes, Umno Kedah would find new strength in the new blend of young and old blood in the party. -- Bernama

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