

# On a high but still pitfalls to watch out for

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COMMENT  
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ONE is the dominant Malay party in the multi-party Barisan Nasional while the other rules two Malay-dominant states and has a credible representation in the Dewan Rakyat.

Combined, their political influence in the country is quite substantive.

However, Umno and PAS are always at loggerheads.

The two parties do not have any quarrel over the *aqidah* (ideological) system in Islam. The difference between them is more of a theological thing.

But their rivalry has always been intense and this will surely continue in the run-up to the elections.

Umno is currently riding a wave of popularity with the improved economic situation in the country, the war on graft by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the proactive measures he has ordered to enhance the delivery system in the civil service.

Abdullah has measured up as a trustworthy leader, even among those who had previously shunned Umno and the Barisan.

In their tours of the states, he and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak have been given rousing welcomes and this has given them the confidence of a bigger victory in the upcoming polls – with an even chance to also wrest Kelantan and Terengganu from PAS.

So, could anything go awry for Umno?

Often, politicians find that some things work out in ways that are just not logical or ratio-

nal to them.

Umno's defeat to PAS in Kelantan in 1990 and the shock defeat in Terengganu in 1999 are examples of surprises that Barisan politicians did not know were in store for them.

There is a popular notion that Umno's dismal show was due to the Anwar Ibrahim issue.

But Anwar was riding high in Umno, with a huge following among young Malaysians, when PAS captured Kelantan in 1990 and retained it in 1995.

Hence, he was not the likely issue in the state in the two elections.

Was it then the fallout between former Umno president Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his challenger Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah that led to Umno's failure in Kelantan?

If the politician prince was the problem in that state, what were the causes of the massive swing of voters to PAS in neighbouring Terengganu?

The state, considered the "Kuwait of Malaysia," had amassed a lot of wealth from oil resources. How could Umno falter?

There were other tales of woe for Umno in the last three elections but Abdullah and Dr Mahathir, before him, had repeatedly told party members to cut down on the excuses and get to work on winning back the hearts and minds of the people.

PAS now finds that the party it perceived to be riddled with scandals, back-stabbing and

bickering is now enjoying popular support.

Not only that. Umno is able to hold 12 other parties together to manage the country while the so-called opposition front – of just a handful of parties – has often found itself in disarray, such as when PAS and the DAP had to go separate ways because of their differing views on the Islamic state issue.

Even though Malaysia is acknowledged as an influential Muslim nation among members of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organisation of Islamic Conference, the elites of PAS do not see that it deserves the tag of "Islamic country."

PAS wants more than that. It wants Islamic laws to overrule the Westminster-style Constitution in the country.

The party paints Umno members as largely obedient consumers in a system run by big business, who ignore the fundamentals of *fardhu ain* (personal obligations) and *fardhu kifayah* (social obligations) while also condoning decadent Western lifestyles.

Umno, however, believes the accusations against it are absurd, childish, self-defeating and nonsensical.

Umno leaders regard the PAS allegations as signs of desperation.

It is, they said, an anxiety that Umno and the Barisan are actually gaining ground while PAS and its allies are beginning to fumble and fall.