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Kedah-PAS

PAS WILL FIND KEDAH TOUGH GOING IN FORTHCOMING POLLS

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ALOR STAR: The war drums of PAS may be getting louder after its strong showing in Kedah in the last 1999 general election, giving the impression that the rice bowl state is likely to fall into its hands in the forthcoming polls.

However, many political observers feel that with the passage of time (and hence events and issues) since 1999, the party's war cry of "Our Year to Capture Kedah" is getting hollow and PAS might find the state tough going after all.

There are many reasons why the political climate of Kedah is changing to favour the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) after the opposition party sprung a surprise by winning 12 of the 36 state seats and denied the BN of its traditional two-thirds majority in the state assembly.

Lacking an influential leader in the state since the demise of its president Datuk Fadzil Noor, PAS is finding its hold in Kedah slipping, lacking strong issues to garner the support of the people.

This is attested by the falling attendance at its ceremah, a far cry from the past.

Chairman of the Kedah State Umno Liaison Committee who is also the Menteri Besar, Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain, said he is certain that PAS is losing its grip in the state.

"On the reverse, Umno is getting stronger and more energetic following several unifying moves made by the party," said Syed Razak in his opening remarks in an exclusive interview with Bernama.

He reiterated his conclusion that PAS had in fact missed its best chance to take over the state in the 1999 polls, when Umno was wrecked by many splits and the opposition were "united" in the form of their "Alternative Front".

The opposition too had many issues to win the sympathies of the voters.

"Even in that favourable situation, they had only won 12 out of the 36 state seats and eight of the 15 parliamentary seats, and the BN could still form the state government," he said.

"For the coming general election, Umno is certain that PAS will not capture Kedah, on the contrary, they will lose several seats," he said.

Commenting on the worry that the Kedah BN is not as strong as it seemed and that his own buoyant confidence is just political showmanship, Syed Razak smiled and said: "We do our homework."

The appointment of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as the prime minister last October also gave a political advantage to the Kedah BN, especially among the rural people.

Although Abdullah is not a Kedahan, the style of his leadership and character is seen to attract the people's support to the BN, particularly from amongst the "fence-sitters" who had thrown their weight behind PAS in the last election.

At the same time, PAS influence on the non-Malay voters is wearing thin and the opposition party's National Islamic State Document unveiled recently had frightened them. Although these non-Malays are the minority in most of the constituencies, their votes are decisive to the candidates.

PAS' former ally, DAP, whether in Kedah or other northern states, are unwilling to be seen cooperating with PAS because of its strong opposition to the orthodox party's version of an Islamic state for Malaysia.

At the same time, the BN is drawing more and more support from those of Thai descent after a special officer was appointed from among them to resolve the various problems faced by the community.

Syed Razak said the moves to unify members of Umno, from the grassroot, branch and divisional levels had strengthened the hand of Umno in particular and the BN in general.

"The blessing of this effort is that the party's election machinery is now running smoothly and efficiently with the return of several influential names following the creation of the (Umno) divisional pro-tem committees

recently," he said.

Syed Razak said the (Umno) divisional leaders had also thrown their support behind the state leadership and they had pledged to work for a resounding election victory in the state.

He also saw the formation of Puteri Umno as a challenge to PAS and advantageous to Umno because it could attract the young voters.

Based on these factors, Syed Razak said he is confident that the BN could wrest back most of the nine state seats occupied PAS and one by Keadilan.

As for the parliamentary seats, he said the BN could capture those held by the PAS leaders, like Mat Sabu in Kuala Kedah, PAS secretary-general Nasharuddin Mat Isa in Yan and former youth leader Mahfuz Omar in Pokok Sena as well as Jerlun and Padang Terap.

Syed Razak also felt that the success of the development projects under the Kedah 2010 Action Plan has led to more and more support of the people for the BN.

Several "controversial" projects which were exploited by PAS for its political gains have now turned into a "liability" to the opposition party when they were implemented successfully.

One good example was the prawn cultivation project in Kerpan, which in the past was widely bandied by PAS as a failure. But now the project had paid off and its first dividends were distributed to the participants before the Aidilfitri festival.

The allocation of RM284.4 million by the federal government to Lembaga Pengairan Pertanian Muda (Mada) to provide agricultural infrastructures to the farmers of Kuala Muda, Sik and Baling, the latter two being poor districts in the state, was a slap to the face of the opposition.

The project would benefit 27,000 farmers who would see their income increasing when they can plant their padi more than once a year.

The BN state government had also risen to the occasion by deflating PAS' attempt to exploit the closure of the People's Religious Schools (SARS) issue by opening a branch of the famous Mahmud College in

every district to provide a sound and recognised religious education.

Syed Razak said the people also welcomed the elevation of their state capital Alor Star to a city as well as the provision of a direct air service for the Haj from Alor Star to Jeddah this season.

The personality of Syed Razak himself is seen as a plus factor for the BN. Political observers said his affable and approachable demeanor with anybody, regardless of their political affiliation, would blunt any PAS moves against him.

Most people said the Menteri Besar is a very humble person and he could mix easily with the people regardless of protocols even when he attends an official function.

PAS on the other hand did not seem to gain any political mileage out of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's retirement, particularly in his constituency of Kubang Pasu, because the people would always value the good services of the former prime minister.

An Umno branch leader in the Sungai Petani parliamentary seat said hundreds of voters in his area who had supported the opposition previously have now come back to support BN.

"During the last election, they did not get the full information on a major controversial issue. But now that they have the full picture, they are no longer angry (with the BN)," he said.

Like the voters of Terengganu, it seem that the Kedah voters are also impatient to wave "PAS, Goodbye". -- Bernama

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