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Even Johor is not safe from Pas' religious card

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FOR as long as one can remember, Johor has been an Umno stronghold. Simply put, Umno should have no problem in Johor. Well, there was one case of an Umno candidate losing an election in Johor - in Parit Bakar in 1990. In the constituency where my kampung is, every single candidate for the Opposition lost the wang pertaruhan (deposit). Until, of course, 1999.

While in the other states BN was struggling to defend its seats, Johor delivered 100 per cent. But look at the figures: 27 per cent of the popular votes went to the Opposition, the highest percentage ever.

Many are worried BN might lose Kedah in the coming election, considering the Opposition won more Parliamentary seats than BN in 1999. But there are other states as well that Umno needs to watch.

In Kedah, the Opposition won 44 per cent of the popular vote. Wilayah Persekutuan should be a cause for worry too. The popular vote for BN was 50.2 per cent. In Selangor, the Opposition made a significant impact by reducing the popular vote to just 53 per cent for BN.

Johor has, time and again, remained an Umno stronghold through some of the most tumultuous moments in Malaysia's political history. Umno Johor stood firm behind the leadership when the Malays in other states were divided over the Dr Mahathir-Tengku Razaleigh tussle back in the 80s. Johor was always the exception when other states were threatened with a stronger, more organised Opposition.

Yet, for the first time in 1999, too many Johor Malays experimented for "a change". All parliamentary seats, considered safe all along, saw a significant reduction in the votes for BN.

Take a look at Johor Baru. In the ninth general election, the majority won by BN was 34,118, but in 1999, the majority was reduced by 10,000 votes. Well, one can point out that in Shah Alam, Selangor, the majority for BN was dramatically reduced to 1,440 votes (from 40,715) while in Hulu Langat it was 3,866 compared with 30,878 in 1995.

Wait a minute, though, Johor is different. To put it in perspective, it was unthinkable for any Umno candidate to see a reduction of more than 1,000 in the popular vote. It used to be a tidal wave of support for BN or Perikatan before that.

The moral of the story is, Johor cannot be complacent. Even in traditionally strong Umno areas - notably the Felda schemes - Pas is making its mark. Unlike other states, settlers in the Felda schemes in Johor are largely from Johor. Theoretically, therefore, they are least inclined to embrace Pas.

But today even in my kampung (we shall not mention the name) Pas has set up a kindergarten and, naturally, a markas or party headquarters.

I remember that in the old days joining a party other than Umno was almost unthinkable. My mother used to take 20 sen to her religious class every Friday, 10 sen for the ustaz and 10 sen for "tabung Umno".

Things have changed, I reckon. Umno is still strong in Johor, no question about that. The Menteri Besar is a nonsense leader who is very much in touch with the people. But there are danger signs ahead.

The Umno leadership in Johor has every reason to be worried. Unless checked, the indoctrination that begins as early as kindergarten will have its impact years from now. Remember, Pas does not intend to wrest Johor from Umno in 2004. Perhaps the party has a grand design for the next 20 years, even 30 years. It has the patience and the commitment.

I have seen what has been happening in my area since 1999. There are enough Pas sympathisers around to make things difficult for the Umno leadership. In those days, everyone I knew in my kampung thought Pas was a party for the Kelantanese. Today, it is becoming trendy to mock Umno leaders and sympathisers.

Religious leaders in the old days came from Umno. They were imam and bilal of mosques and surau. Johor has probably the most comprehensive and progressive system of religious education in the country. Johoreans are supposed to be more open-minded and worldly, yet reasonably religious. But today, the division as the result of politics is slowly but surely defining some segments of the society.

Last week, this newspaper came out with some eye-popping findings. A nationwide survey conducted recently pointed out that a staggering 49 per cent of Malays believe that the hudud is suitable for Malaysia. Yet we comfort ourselves by believing that hudud is nothing more than a political gimmick and a part of the Pas agenda.

Apparently, significant numbers of Malays are buying it. What does that tell us? Simply put, Pas has created doubt among the Malays. Little wonder hudud will be their battle-cry now and forever.

Umno should strategise, or things will get worse. Even in Johor, there are some leaders who actually believe that Umno still claims its birthright in Johor, that the people will vote only for Umno, no matter what happens.

How wrong they can be. The present generation of Malays is relatively more affluent than the preceding one. After all, the country is prosperous and enough development is in place to last them more than a lifetime. The danger is Johoreans are getting worried they are being left behind in the religious bandwagon.

No state is safe at the rate Pas is playing the religious card. Not even Johor.

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