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Gearing up for the election

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A COUPLE of days ago, this writer met a recently `rehabilitated' Umno divisional leader at the Alor Star Sultan Abdul Halim Airport.

Like many other Umno leaders these days, he is a resident of Kuala Lumpur. He took up residence in the capital because he was, some years ago, a deputy minister. He remains in the city to do business after falling out of grace.

It was both the necessary and the correct thing to do. Being removed from one's post, it is best he or she stays as far away as possible from the kawasan.

Together with scores of other Umno Members of Parliament (MPs) and State Legislative Assembly members, he was excluded from the 1999 general election and from party posts on suspicion that he was too closely allied to the ousted former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

He was replaced by a lesser-known candidate. Barisan Nasional (BN) lost the seat together with seven others to Pas to give the opposition the edge.

Thus, until the Pendang Parliamentary seat was regained in a by-election in 2002, albeit on a paper-thin majority, Pas had a lead in the parliamentary seat count - eight to seven in Kedah.

It nearly captured the State Legislative Assembly, winning 12 out of 36 seats.

Thus, Kedah will be the testing ground for the new BN leadership under Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in the coming general election.

As for the rehabilitated former MP, his trip back to his hometown a stone's throw away from the Thai border had little to do with politics. He was visiting his aged mother for the Aidil-Adha celebrations.

I enquired if he had visited his party division since he had just been appointed to the pro-tem committee of the division by Abdullah. His response was swift and earnest. `No, I won't dare go,' he said.

Why not? Isn't he supposed to help his divisional chief and other members of the divisional committee to prepare the party for the general election, which by most reckoning, is around the corner?

Of course he wants to help. It's his duty. But going back to the division after you have been shown the door isn't as straightforward as saying `hello guys I'm back'. It doesn't work that way - at least not in the `new' Umno. It is not so much because his loyalty was once questioned, but because far too many people in the party want posts and position.

PUTTING SELF-INTEREST ASIDE

MORE than loyalty, it is jealousy and self-interest. The talk of working for the party is, for many, hogwash. This is the ghost that Abdullah has to exorcise to cleanse the party of self-serving leaders.

To save the rehabilitated former MP the backlash, let us not reveal his identity for now. It is sufficient to say that he comes from an old political and ulama family. He is highly educated and his father was an Umno assemblyman in the early days of independence.

He was dropped from the 1999 general election as much for his alleged association with Anwar as the threat he posed to the state Umno leadership then.

But unlike thousands of others who left to form Parti Keadilan Rakyat or went to live abroad, he remains loyal to Umno.

This, it seems, has not escaped Abdullah's attention. So, in the recent reshuffle of Umno's state and divisional leadership, he was brought back.

The move is good for Kedah. The state has not had good leadership for decades. This has resulted in the progressive decline in the support for Umno despite being propped up by the centre under Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, himself from Kedah.

When shortly after the 1995 general election, this writer wrote in Utusan Malaysia to warn the BN of its shrinking popular votes in many state and parliamentary constituencies, the state's Umno leaders were upset.

They brought out their conspiracy theory and, as always, accused the Press of harbouring a personal agenda. For refusing to face reality, many of them were swept off their chairs in the 1999 general election.

#### KEDAH, THE HOT SEAT

THUS, retaining Kedah is crucial for Abdullah. It is far more important than regaining Terengganu or making a comeback in Kelantan.

Kelantan and Terengganu were lost to Pas during his predecessor's time. Regaining Terengganu, which does not look impossible, is a bonus. Adding a few more seats in Kelantan is victory enough. But retaining Kedah is imperative.

If he loses Kedah, the Prime Minister will find it that much more difficult to establish his credibility and strengthen his mandate, and to check the southward spread of Pas.

Assuming that Kedah Umno leaders know what is good for them, they would not only accept the new appointees but, more importantly, would also do well to reassess themselves.

They cannot expect the people to support Umno if its leaders are not up to their expectations. A political party is as good as the people leading it.

The call to support the party and not personalities is pretty meaningless if the people leading the party are incapable and, worse still, corrupt and abusive.

Pas has always been strong in Kedah. But in recent years it has become stronger partly because there has been a corresponding decline in the quality of leadership in Umno and BN in the state.

With Abdullah talking about regenerating Umno and BN, and creating a clean government, he has little choice but to identify new and younger candidates to represent the coalition in the coming general election.

There is nothing out of the ordinary in the desire of the Prime Minister to see more young and capable people representing BN. Dr Mahathir did exactly that in his first general election as Prime Minister in 1982. He put up his own candidates, who were mostly young and new in the party hierarchy.

It would be tremendously helpful if those long-serving and aging incumbents - in Kedah and everywhere - could voluntarily withdraw, thus making it easier for Abdullah to go about selecting younger and more capable candidates.

This is certainly not asking too much when we have many MPs and state representatives who have been on the job for two decades or more, with some having become very wealthy in the process.

They should leave politics and concentrate on business or simply enjoy their wealth. They cannot keep everything to themselves and yet speak of fairness, openness and accountability.

Since Abdullah has made it his agenda to clean up the government and improve the civil service, he has to make sure that candidates for the coming general election, whether they are new faces or incumbents, are thoroughly vetted. Abdullah's desire to see his candidates withstand voter

scrutiny may not be fulfilled if they fail to pass his own litmus test.

Let us be frank. Many of today's BN MPs and state representatives are spent forces.

They may be good in politics and even better in politicking but it takes more than politics to ensure Malaysia's survival in the globalised world.

Of course, we must recognise that the task of introducing new faces without rocking the boat is not going to be easy. At the divisions, party members and supporters are not keen on parachute candidates.

Thus, those who have been anointed to contest should not rely solely on their backers in Kuala Lumpur. They should first make sure that they are acceptable to members and supporters in the constituencies.

But in special circumstances, Umno members must allow the party to prevail by accepting outsiders to contest in their areas.

This is what makes Pas successful. Its supporters are willing to accept candidates who are not local boys.

#### ADDRESSING HOUSING WOES

ONE constant promise in the election is housing. Despite making great strides in the area, housing remains a major issue in urban areas.

While there is a worrisome oversupply of properties, including residential units, hundreds of thousands of people are still without their own homes or are living in sub-standard quarters.

The Treasury reported that there were 59,750 unsold residential units worth RM7.9 billion in the fourth quarter of 2002. Despite the overhang, the government continues to allow developers to build more housing, industrial, retail, shopping and office properties.

At the end of 2002, the value of these unsold units was estimated at over RM29 billion.

There is clearly a serious mismatch between supply and demand in the property market.

At the top of the equation is the problem of affordability. Far too many housing units have been built and priced beyond the ability of average buyers.

When the units are reasonably priced, they are usually located in non-strategic areas, requiring house owners to travel long distances to work and put up with poor public amenities.

When low- and medium-cost housing units are built in non-strategic areas because land is cheap, they normally do not attract buyers and occupants. This is because low- and medium-income families cannot afford to travel long distances to work.

It makes sense for them to endure poor living conditions in towns and cities than spend a sizeable portion of their income on transportation.

Last but not least, there is the problem of political interference that favours selected buyers, who instead of occupying the units leave them vacant or rent them.

#### KEEPING THE WHEEL OF COMMERCE TURNING

THESE and other related problems have made house-ownership a thorny issue, resulting in squatter areas staying open despite low- and medium-cost apartments being built around them.

Current programmes, including public and private funding for house ownership, do not seem to be able to fully address the problems of oversupply and the ability of buyers to buy the units of their choice.

Yet, the success in enhancing house ownership and the upgrading of homes has the potential of spawning a whole range of economic activities from the supply of construction materials to electrical goods, interior decoration items, furniture and landscaping.

It would be useful for the government and the banking sector to go beyond the existing funding activities.

In developed countries where housing growth is slow, the sector is kept robust by such activities as renovation and upgrade, funded by local building societies.

With the Malaysian economy inching towards maturity, it would only be a matter of time before less and less property units are built and sold. The construction industry will have to depend more heavily on renovation, upgrade and replacement.

A more conducive funding environment could encourage house owners to buy larger units when their income improves or to renovate their existing homes.

Without a sufficiently large replacement economy - people buying new and better television sets, furniture items and the like - we cannot hope to keep our economy robust for a very long time.

It is comforting that Abdullah has started to address the economic issues by meeting business leaders and corporate executives.

The wheel of commerce has to be kept turning.

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