

08/03/2004

Hadi Awang's unkindest cut

HOW politics can debase people. At the 1999 general election Pas soaked up the disaffection caused by the jailing of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim without having to lift a finger. In the absence of a windfall issue this time around, the opposition party has had to find its own feet - and its struggles have seen it sliding from the moral high ground. As soon as the polling date was announced, the depths were tested by Pas president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang as he launched his campaign in Terengganu on Friday. The prophet of Rusila dived into the declared Pas strategy of attacking the Prime Minister's religious standing with a vengeance. Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was accused of parading his leadership of prayers at mosques for political gain, and Hadi presumed to prove this by pointing out that his Umno counterpart had not led the funerary rites for his mother.

As inured as Malaysians are to electoral theatre, many were aghast at Hadi's insensitivity. Pas loathes the idea that Abdullah could steal its Islamic thunder, and may be expected to bang its holy books as hard as it can in its agony to win votes. But even paranoia cannot possibly condone Hadi's strike at the heart of the Prime Minister's bereavement. Datuk Kailan Hassan, who had anchored her son through his tribulations, died a little over a month ago. There can be no doubt that Hadi had aimed to hit the Prime Minister where it hurt most, thereby lowering the arena he has chosen to fight the election from the pulpit to the gutter. It was a cheap shot at impugning Abdullah's credibility, ranking well below the vote-baiting extortions of his spiritual senior, Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat.

In contrast to the combative Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Abdullah has been unusually tolerant of Pas. He has stayed aloof of the hate-fuelled devil-mongering theocratic party relies on to distinguish itself from the moderate Umno. Pas may well assume that no tactic is too dirty for the imperative of converting the country to its version of the hudud. But if the ends justify the means, then the character of the Government it seeks to set up is bound to be mirrored by those who, like Hadi, have deigned to stoop so low.