

01/02/2004

Only one Mahathir in Kedah and that makes the difference

Abdul Razak Ahmad

While Pas is looking at Kedah as a frontline State in the coming elections, it still has to contend with its greatest nemesis - the Mahathir-factor, writes ABDUL RAZAK AHMAD.

TUN, Dr M, Dr Mahathir, or just plain Mahathir? Since his retirement, fans of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad have been grappling to find the most appropriate way to refer to the former Prime Minister, who for 22 years was known to many as just "PM".

In his home State of Kedah, his admirers know him as "Che Det". But whether one is an admirer of Dr Mahathir or not, he can now be referred to as "State Barisan Nasional election machinery adviser".

Dr Mahathir can be expected to play an active role in Kedah in the general election.

He will not be a candidate, but will visit divisions and campaign in a State that is likely to see the most intense battles between Umno and Pas.

Will his involvement be a boon or bane to Kedah Umno, whose fortunes faded considerably in the 1999 general election?

Some believe the former Prime Minister will strengthen the BN's machinery and boost Umno's popularity in Kedah. Dr Mahathir is riding high due to his accomplishments as a former national leader.

But will his presence in the polls cause the Opposition to focus its attacks squarely on him, reigniting old quarrels that helped Pas make strong gains in Kedah in 1999?

This question was posed to a long-time friend of Dr Mahathir's, Tan Sri Azahari Md Taib. An old Umno hand in the State, Azahari, 80, is now the party's Kedah adviser. He asks me where my hometown is before answering the question.

"Kedahans view Dr Mahathir differently compared to people like you," he says, referring to me as the outsider from Kuala Lumpur.

"People from the Federal Territory, for example, may see Dr Mahathir as just a national leader. We, on the other hand, see him as a Kedahan who inspires much pride in us.

"To us, Dr Mahathir is like our father, macam Pak kita. If Pas thinks it can change this perception here, then they better reconsider."

Pas vice-president Azizan Abdul Razak baulks at the suggestion.

The Kedah Pas commissioner, who is likely to become Menteri Besar if the party wins the State in the election, brushes aside predictions that Dr Mahathir's participation will throw a spanner in the works for the party.

"Look, we won 12 of the 36 State seats and eight of the 15 parliamentary seats in Kedah in 1999, when Dr Mahathir was Prime Minister.

"And unlike Kedah Umno, in which there was in-fighting, we spent all the time after 1999 preparing for this election, so do you really think we'll fare any worse in the coming polls, when he's just an adviser and no longer Prime Minister?"

Some say Pas' confidence in wresting Kedah, with or without Dr Mahathir, is not entirely misplaced.

A foreign newspaper article, for example, quoted "the latest ground reports" which indicate that Pas will form the next State Government in Kedah, as it is supposedly able to win 19 out of the 36 State Assembly seats.

But to those who are actually on the ground, the prediction seems at odds with current realities.

Unlike the 1999 polls, when Umno faced a host of problems mostly arising from the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, there is now a dearth of issues that have the potential to ignite voter sentiment.

This, added with the painfully obvious failings of many Pas "professional" elected representatives to service their rural constituents, has stacked the odds for victory heavily in the BN's favour.

The Opposition party in the State is left mainly with its Islamic state plank, which can be a bit of a hard-sell for Kedah voters.

"Many people mistakenly lump Kedah Pas voters with their Kelantan counterparts, who are known for their abject loyalty to the party and its leaders," notes an Umno division vice-chief.

"In this State, no matter how loyal Opposition supporters are towards Pas leaders like the late former president Datuk Fadzil Mohd Noor - who was a Kedahan to boot - they pale in comparison to how Kelantan Pas supporters deify Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat.

"Here, issues like whether the MP can deliver, are still very important. An Islamic state and the demonisation of Dr Mahathir will not serve as the be-all and end-all for voters."

Another plus point for Kedah Umno is that it is today in much better shape than it was in 1999, when dissatisfaction over the line-up of candidates caused some memorable protests. This led to the party's election machinery grinding to a halt in several areas.

The greater unity in the party nowadays is widely touted, but potential problems can still flare up, especially if in-fighting occurs in the jostle to be selected as election candidates.

"It is a potential problem that is also on the minds of all other State Umno leaders, but we feel that if Dr Mahathir is with us, he can help solve any such problems which may arise," says Azahari.

"He will be able to step in and his word will carry special weight because people respect him."

I ask Azahari whether what he meant to say was that Umno members in Kedah are afraid of Dr Mahathir.

"It's more like how we view a stern but caring father ...we feel a mixture of fear and respect," he says, and the many contributions which Kedah Umno hopes to receive from one of the State's most illustrious sons begin to carry a bittersweet undertone.

There is an underlying realisation that Dr Mahathir's retirement finally signalled the end of a golden era for Kedah Umno, which has produced two Prime Ministers.

Some say his departure, and the squabbling in 1999, which saw many rising stars cast aside by insecure party warlords, left Kedah Umno with a shortage of second-tier leaders.

"Kedah Umno is in transition. We used to have a significant 'quota' of Cabinet Ministers, but many are no longer around, and the second-liners are not there yet.

"This period of transition carries many uncertainties, which is why having Dr Mahathir as State BN election machinery adviser is important."

For Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain, who will be leading the BN into what could be the State's toughest election to date, the presence of Dr Mahathir is most welcome.

"He will advise us on the strategies to win in Kedah, supplementing the current campaign machinery. His agreement to help out is a gesture which means a lot to us."

Syed Razak is, however, quick to add that the State election machinery is not only being bolstered by Dr Mahathir's presence, but also by support from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, both of whom are expected to visit the

State next month.

Perhaps not coincidentally, Pas has lined up several major events this month in the State. With the political temperature set to rise further, I ask Azahari more questions about the former Prime Minister, whom I refer to as "Tun".

He interjects.

"Stop calling him Tun. I know many people who carry the title. Call him Mahathir, so I know whom you are referring to.

"There are many Tuns in our country, but to me and many other Kedahans, there is only one Mahathir."