

09/03/2004

Abdullah won't take Pas bait over personal attacks

Brendan Pereira

THE blood drained from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's face two nights ago when he was told that Pas was querying why he had not led prayers at his mother's funeral.

"I will not dignify that comment with an answer," he told aides, referring to the barb lobbed at him by Pas president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang.

"The BN will not get involved in any personal attacks."

Since that day, Abdullah has been continuously baited by the Opposition, especially the Pas leader. They want him to get involved in some name-calling, the kind that marred the political landscape in the run-up to the last elections in 1999.

Abdullah's decision not to be the imam at his mother's funeral is still being questioned by Pas politicians, concerned about sharing with a progressive thinker the space of religious discourse they have dominated since the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in 1998.

The argument they mount goes this way: Abdullah's decision to lead prayers during the fasting month was a political gimmick to burnish his religious standing in the community. If he really was religious, he should have known that it was necessary for him to lead prayers at his mother's funeral.

Religious experts have questioned the taste and veracity of the attack.

Abdul Hadi has also opened another front in his broadside against the PM, saying that he was merely doing the bidding of Tun Mahathir Mohamad and was still operating in the shadow of the former PM.

This is the same accusation that Keadilan threw at Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, expecting similar reaction.

In the days ahead, expect the comments to become more biting.

All of the words that escape the lips of Pas leaders have one intention: to provoke a similar tirade from Abdullah or Najib or other senior members of the Barisan Nasional.

The Opposition has skilled strategists in their midst. What they want to do is recreate the angst and fervour of the last electoral campaign when name-calling was the order of the day. Those were the days when Tun Mahathir was labelled a cruel Pharaoh and every part of his anatomy was ridiculed by the Opposition.

Stung, BN officials hit back, lampooning Pas leaders as deviationists and calling Dr Harun Din a fraud; a bomoh who claimed to have special powers but fled to Australia to treat his heart ailment.

Pas wants a return to those days. It wants Abdullah to get personal, to hit back with bile.

Why? Because it is used to fighting a sharp-tongued PM, rather than one with a soft touch. Recent focus group surveys of Malay voters in Kemaman, Marang and Kuala Terengganu suggest that the rank and file of Pas are uncomfortable with the idea of attacking Abdullah with the same venom as they did Dr Mahathir.

Says political commentator Datuk Shamsul Amri Baharuddin: "One of the lessons from the Anwar issue is that Malays are turned off when the attacks get personal and only one side seems to be doing the shouting.

"Pas needs Abdullah Badawi to start hitting back."

The Opposition knows that Abdullah is the jewel in BN's crown. They know that he has a story to sell to Malaysians. In his four months in office,

he has planted the seed of change, reform and hope.

It is a compelling story, one which could persuade more Malaysians to give their vote to him and the BN, or more importantly, convince segments of the Malay ground that he deserves to be given the benefit of doubt.

For Pas, this story should not be told.

The last thing it wants is for the polls to be a referendum on Abdullah's 100 days in office. The only way they can prevent that from happening is by turning the run-up to the March 21 election into another slugfest, where the PM's message is drowned out by vitriol over the Pas Islamic-state concept and other incendiary issues.

Judging by Abdullah's performance at a Press conference after launching the election machinery of BN Malacca, Pas is not going to get the bruising fight they want.

When a reporter asked Abdullah to comment on the allegation that Pas was trying to snare votes with the promise of heaven, he declined to answer. When another reporter asked him to comment on the nature of personal attacks by Pas, once again, he declined to answer.

Pas, it appears, may not get the brawl it wants with Abdullah.