

23/11/2003

`Battle of the flags' begins

Shamsul Akmar

THE Malay political battle lines have been drawn and can be called the "Battle of the Flags". It started when Pas-led Terengganu, through the Kuala Terengganu Municipal Council, brought down Umno flags put up to mark Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's visit to the State on Nov 16.

Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob decided to take up the fight on behalf of Umno, ordering State authorities to bring down all Opposition flags.

Then, the Pas Menteri Besar of Kelantan, Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, decided to take the middle ground, declaring that he would not issue such directives.

To him, politicians are supposed to be "gentlemen" and should not resort to the the action taken in Terengganu and Pahang.

Nothing much would have been read into his remarks if they were directed merely at Pahang, but to include Terengganu makes many wonder whether he is insinuating that not only Adnan is ungentlemanly but also Pas president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang who is the Menteri Besar of Terengganu.

But a remark from a colleague was quite funny.

"Let's just hope that in the enthusiasm among Pas and Umno people to bring down their flags in Terengganu and Pahang, they do not end up bringing down the Malaysian and State flags too."

Bringing down flags of political opponents may be regarded as childish.

But it reflects the intensity of politics in the Malay heartland in the east coast.

And these States will determine many of the policies and visions of the two main Malay political parties, Umno and Pas.

In fact, Umno and the Barisan Nasional are quite comfortable in most of the other States, especially Sabah and Sarawak. Of the 219 parliamentary seats up for grabs in the general election, Sabah and Sarawak account for 53.

Given the absence of a credible opposition to the BN in Sabah, and the fact that Sarawak BN has always delivered, the coalition is entering the next general election with almost 25 per cent of the parliamentary seats in the bag.

Then there is the Umno stronghold of Johor, with 26 seats to offer. Even in the worst of times, the BN has done well in the State. Hence it is almost assured of another 10 per cent of the parliamentary seats.

All the coalition needs is another 20 per cent to gain a simple majority. It is expected to do well in Perak (24 seats), Penang (13), Negri Sembilan (eight), Malacca (six) and Perlis (three) while turning out creditable performances in Selangor (22) and Pahang (14). The two-thirds majority is within its grasp.

However, the real test for Umno is in the Malay-majority States - Kelantan (14), Terengganu (eight), and Kedah (15). In Kedah, the BN lost eight seats to Pas in 1999.

Pas also has its eye on Pahang, another Malay-dominated State, but it is highly unlikely that it will make "damaging" inroads into the State.

Against this backdrop it was not surprising that Abdullah, when announcing the new protem committees for the Umno divisions yesterday, made special mention of Kelantan.

Kelantan saw four out of 14 division heads being dropped, the highest

casualty rate among all States.

Except for Datuk Ahmad Saad of Permatang Pauh in Penang, the other incumbents not retained had opted out of their own accord.

They included Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad who chose to vacate his position as the Kubang Pasu division chief. He is replaced by his deputy and former Kedah Menteri Besar Tan Sri Osman Aroff.

In Pulai, Johor, Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat is replaced by his son Datuk Nor Jazlan Mohamed.

In Kelantan, the incumbents dropped are Datuk Paduka Ibrahim Ali of Pasir Mas (replaced by his deputy Datuk Abdul Rahim Abdul Rahman), Kuala Krai's Datuk Wan Zaid Wan Abdullah (Datuk Ramzi Abdul Rahman, Abdullah's political secretary), Bachok's Datuk Ahmad Shahibuddin Mohd Noor (Tenaga Nasional Bhd chairman Datuk Awang Adek Hussin) and Kubang Krian's Tuan Hashim Tuan Yaakob (Datuk Ahmad Rusli Ibrahim).

The only surprise in the Kelantan line-up is the inclusion of former Rural Development Minister Datuk Annuar Musa, who had been embroiled in controversy over funds managed by the ministry when he was heading it.

Umno insiders in Kelantan say the changes were made to prove to Kelantan folk that the party is serious about bringing back voters who are fed up with "the same old faces".

However, the battle for supremacy in the State remains tough. In fact, the party has a better chance of a strong showing in Terengganu.

"The political history of Kelantan shows that it has always leaned towards the Opposition," an observer from the State says.

"In the first general election in 1959, the State was won by Pas and the party held on until 1978 when the BN took over. But the BN lost the State in the 1990 general election.

"In 1978, the BN triumphed in Kelantan only because of a series of political incidents which benefited it.

"In 1974, Pas joined the BN but was kicked out in 1977. In between, an internal squabble led to the removal of highly popular Menteri Besar Datuk Mohamed Nasir and this led to the formation of the splinter party, Berjasa.

"In the 1978 election, Umno combined with Berjasa to trounce Pas in Kelantan. But in 1990, a split in Umno led to the formation of Semangat 46. The splinter party co-operated with Pas and annihilated Umno," the observer says.

Although Kelantan Umno is trying to build a new image and introduce new faces, Pas is intact under Nik Aziz's leadership.

"In the past, the victory and defeat of Umno or Pas in Kelantan had always been determined by a 10 to 15 per cent voter swing. Right now, Umno may have a group of voters solidly behind it but it needs the 10 per cent swing to win the State and that may come only if there is a crack in Kelantan Pas," he adds.

But it is not the same with Terengganu.

The State, until the 1999 election, was not known to be "sympathetic" to the Opposition. Except for a brief period after the 1959 election, the party had never been able to take control of Terengganu though it had retained a certain following among some 35 per cent of the voters.

In 1999, the combination of the people's frustration with the Umno leadership and anger over the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, led to a massive voter swing to Pas, says a Terengganu Umno divisional leader.

"Those who voted for Pas were traditionally Umno voters. What we need now is to get back at least half of those who abandoned us in the last election to give us a good chance of taking the fight to Pas.

"It is not easy but I believe our situation is much better than our counterparts in Kelantan," he adds.

If what is said by him and the observer is a reflection of the situation in the two States, the different reactions to the bringing down of the Umno flags in Terengganu are understandable.

Nik Aziz can afford not to resort to the "ungentlemanly" political conduct (in his own words) because he does not see Pas' rule in Kelantan in jeopardy.

In Terengganu, every action matters, including bringing down Umno flags. In short, Terengganu Pas is not leaving anything to chance.

The Umno supreme council has not changed the divisional line-up in Terengganu. Is that a signal that Umno is ready to take back Terengganu?