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Deal with the enemy within

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SOME Umno members from out-side Kelantan have been heard saying that party leaders should just give up on the State.

"There seems no end to their internal bickering. They blame everyone else except themselves for the party's defeat. In the 1990 general election, they said the defeat was caused by the split in Umno which led to Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah forming Semangat 46.

"In the 1995 election, they managed to win back some seats and believed the subsequent election would see them performing better. But in the 1999 general election, the party lost the seats they won and only managed to secure a few belonging to Semangat candidates who had returned to Umno, and that included Razaleigh," said a grassroots Umno leader from Johor.

They also blamed the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim as the reason for their defeat in the 1999 elections.

No doubt the reasons for Umno's poor performance in Kelantan in the 1990 and 1999 general elections had a lot to do with what occurred within the party at the national level.

A senior Umno leader said Kelantan Umno should not be solely blamed for their three consecutive electoral defeats.

"Kelantan has always been Umno's Achilles heel. The State's political history has shown that from the very first general election in 1959, the people always seemed to favour Pas over Umno.

"Umno only managed to gain a hold in Kelantan after Pas joined Barisan Nasional in 1974. Though Pas left the coalition in 1977, Umno won again in the 1978 election when the Pas splinter party Berjasa joined ranks with Umno.

"In the 1982 and 1986 general elections which saw Umno's grip on the State continue, Pas was rebuilding. When the 1990 election came, the State was ripe for Pas' picking. The 1987 split in Umno made the outcome inevitable."

All this is history now and Kelantan Umno, after three terms of watching Pas mould Kelantan the way it sees fit, is trying to regain a footing.

In 1990, the State Umno leaders blamed the split at national level for their defeat but Semangat 46 is now defunct and Razaleigh is back in Umno. If they blame the 1999 defeat on Anwar, the matter seems to be a nonissue today.

Going by simple assessment, there shouldn't be any reason for Kelantan Umno not to win back or at least put up a creditable showing in the next general election.

However, much water has flowed under the bridge since the 1990 general election. Pas has become quite strong, managing to turn its Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat into a novelty if not an icon for Kelantanese.

The State Umno too has undergone leadership changes. Party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself was the Kelantan Umno chief from 1990 before passing the mantle to Razaleigh a few months prior to the 1999 general election and then to Datuk Mustapa Mohamed in 2000. Mustapa himself has changed the office bearers of the Kelantan liaison committee three times since he took charge, the last time barely a month ago.

Although Mustapa has been credited with hard work at what is considered an uphill task, the fact remains that nothing he was doing to shake up the State Umno seemed right.

On Thursday, Mustapa said several party leaders wanted the State Umno to name its candidates on the eve of nomination day. If Kelantan Umno were to do that, it would be definitely breaking away from the party tradition, the Opposition included.

Several leaders, including BN secretarygeneral Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat and Umno supreme council member Datuk Annuar Musa, who is from Kelantan, cautioned Mustapa against naming candidates early.

Mohamed said naming candidates early would only give the Opposition a head start over Umno candidates and "crush" them long before nomination. Annuar believed it would give the Opposition a chance to ridicule Umno's candidates.

However, in Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, Mustapa has a supporter. Muhammad believes naming the candidates early will give ample time to the leaders to mend any rifts among members.

A veteran Umno leader from Kelantan, while agreeing that, ideally, Umno should name its candidates early, feared the culture of sabotage and poison pen letters may ruin the proposed candidate's image so badly that the party could be affected even if replacements were named.

A political observer, however, believed that Umno should only try out such drastic moves in a State like Kelantan.

"What is the point of holding on to a tradition which has not borne any fruit, at least insofar as Kelantan is concerned? Furthermore, the problems of candidacy are never due to the Opposition but rather from within Umno itself."

A political analyst concurred, arguing that it was better for Umno candidates in Kelantan to be named early so that the culture of sabotage could be curbed.

"We all know the term *peteh* or *cah keteng* (sabotage) in the politics of Kelantan Umno. This will generally happen when a candidate is named and there are individuals who feel they should have been the ones chosen.

"If the one who is not selected is influential, he will then find ways to sabotage the candidate and when that happens, the Umno candidate would have lost even before polling.

"As such, if the candidate is only made known on nomination day or a couple of days earlier, and the campaign period usually allowed is a maximum of two weeks, the party will be spending the first week trying stop any attempt to sabotage or to close ranks between the candidate and his rival. Only after this is solved can the party machinery concentrate on taking on the Opposition."

Several other observers also believed that since the sabotage culture is quite widespread in Kelantan Umno, naming the candidates early could also help "smoke out" the saboteurs.

"The saboteurs cannot continue with their activities for long without being noticed. However, if the candidates are named just a week or two before election, it is difficult to undo the damage to the candidate if there is sabotage," said one.

Furthermore, another said, naming the candidates early would inculcate the culture of serving the electorate.

"Once an Umno man knows that he is identified as a candidate, he will go all out to woo his constituents and that, in fact, will give him a head start. It will also give the party a head start in deciding if their choice is right or otherwise.

"We should realise by now that no Umno leader at division level is going to go all out to serve the electorate unless he or she is certain of being chosen as a candidate. Until they are sure, the leaders will be more concerned about ensuring their control over the Umno members in the division."

The observer said the argument that the move would provide the Opposition with the opportunity to crush or ridicule the Umno candidates did not hold water.

"Why should Umno be worried about what Pas or the other Opposition parties say about their candidates if they know their candidate is clean, able and has no skeletons in his cupboard? Isn't that how Umno candidates should be? And, surely, the Umno leadership, when selecting its candidates, will try to ensure they are the best among the lot and better than the Opposition," he added.

What the observer said stands to reason as most Umno incumbents are generally accepted as the ones defending their seats, which means they are then subjected to ridicule by the Opposition from day one after they win the seat to polling day in the next election.

"If Umno incumbents can withstand the ridicule over not only one but several terms, why should new Umno candidates, who are generally less vulnerable, be so fragile when the ridicule is only going to be less than a year if they are named now and the election held next year?" asked a divisional Umno leader from Terengganu.

Going by that argument, the fear of naming candidates early is not about what the Opposition may do but more what other contending Umno candidates may do if they are not chosen. It is obvious Kelantan Umno's main enemy is within and Pas only gets into the picture later. If they are unable to resolve that, the State's leaders might as well give up.