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Giggles and cackles as Kelantan Umno `tok dalang' stage political wayang

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THE political wayang kulit (shadow play) can be expected to start in Kelantan soon. The only problem is that everyone wants to be the tok dalang (puppet masters).

Thursday's announcement by Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad of new faces appointed to key positions in the party's State liaison committee marked the raising of the curtains for the show.

The new appointees - Zaid Ibrahim as the deputy Umno Kelantan chief, Mat Nawawi Mat Jusoh as the secretary, Datuk Awang Adek Hussin as treasurer and Che Alwi Che Ahmad as information chief - are basically heralding new tok dalang to manage the play alongside the State Umno chief Datuk Mustapa Mohamed.

Dropped were Datuk Annuar Musa, Tuan Hashim Tuan Yaacob, Datuk Nik Hussain Ab Rahman and Datuk Ismail Mamat.

While these appointments are meant to strengthen the State Umno, there are two groups that Umno, Mustapa and the new line-up need to deal with. One would be supporters and/or leaders who had been dropped. The other comprises leaders who feel they should have been chosen.

This, however, is not a new syndrome afflicting Kelantan Umno or other State Umno. The only difference is that the Umno in other States, with the exception of Terengganu, is still in power, unlike Kelantan which has been under Pas since the 1990 general election.

This places Kelantan Umno under scrutiny and every wrong move made by its leaders tends to be amplified.

But that is besides the point.

What is of essence here is the fact that as long as Kelantan Umno leaders feel they are most qualified to do the job but are dropped or not chosen to lead the party at the State level, then the wayang kulit amid the political power play will prevail.

An outspoken Kelantan leader, Datuk Ibrahim Ali, who is the Pasir Mas division chief, was initially reluctant to express his thoughts. But after being pressed for his views, he made some telling remarks.

"If the Federal Umno leaders have given much thought and believe the new line-up is capable and able to capture Kelantan, being loyal party members, everybody will have to support it. I hope they can deliver.

"That's politics. But as far as I am concerned, I am useless to Datuk Mustapa and to the Federal Umno leaders. Maybe it is because I am not an actor or they might see me carrying somebody's face."

Ibrahim stopped his comments here, but it is obvious there are many, many ways to interpret his remarks and what he feels about the whole episode.

A long-time observer of Kelantan politics felt what Dr Mahathir and the top Umno leadership had done was the boldest move thus far in dealing with the State Umno.

"Everyone accepts the fact that Kelantan Umno has been in shambles, and not many will dare to give it a ghost of a chance of wresting the State from Pas.

"No doubt the new appointees have their own shortcomings. In fact, of the four, only two are truly new faces - Zaid and Awang Adek. Alwi was Annuar's political secretary who contested the last time and lost, while Mat Nawawi had also contested and lost. But he won more times than he had lost."

That pointed out, it is obvious that the main problem for Kelantan Umno is unity among its leaders and their readiness to accept others in leading the State instead of themselves.

Another observer believes that before Kelantan Umno can take the battle to Pas' court, it has to first remedy its own malaise.

"Each division leader and their committee members need to rally around the State Umno leadership. The 14 divisional leaders and committee members total some 500 people. If these 500 or so divisional leaders can get their act together, then and only then can the thousands of branch leaders rediscover the need to unite and take on Pas. If not, they will continue to self-destruct."

The thing is that each of these State Umno leaders had been known to remark that they had left it to the top leadership to decide how things should be shaped.

However, when the Federal Umno leaders decide to make the changes, they would be among the first to take things personally. Some would even go to the extent of peteh keteng (sabotage) the new appointees.

This is a malaise in Umno which Barisan Nasional secretary-general Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat described as the "leave it to the Prime Minister or Umno president syndrome".

When he coined the phrase, Mohamed was referring to Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik's resignation saga. But that is another story.

The point is that the Kelantan Umno leaders do not seem to realise they may not be the right persons to lead, but refuse to back off when the signs are on the wall.

They would rather "leave it to the party president" and when he makes the decision, they do not seem to be happy at all.

It is also quite unnerving, as pointed out by a close aide of a Federal Umno leader, that State leaders who had been replaced forgot how they had gone around asking their political opponents from the Umno division to support them when they were chosen or appointed.

"However, when they themselves are replaced, the same principle does not apply. They suddenly feel there is no need to show their support for the new ones."

Said an unranked Kelantan Umno member over the whole thing:

"Can't these disgruntled State Umno leaders hear Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz (Nik Mat - Pas' Mentri Besar of Kelantan) giggling?"

"He may not giggle that much now after the appointments, but he will probably be cackling when he discovers fellow Kelantan Umno members and leaders trying to do the new ones in."

Against this backdrop, the wayang kulit of Kelantan politics is being performed. It is quite baffling why Nik Aziz decided to ban the art.