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Kelantan problem persists

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SWEARING by the Quran, which believers consider the biggest mukjizat (miracle) from God, seems a sure way of finding a footing in Malay politics.

Even though no one has actually done this so far, the challenge has been thrown more than once.

The latest case concerns Puteri Umno member Yusnita Romli who last week challenged Abdul Razak Abas, acquitted on a charge of exposing himself to her, to swear on the Quran that she did not make up the accusations.

The past few days have also seen Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz challenging deputy Pas Youth chief Salahuddin Ayub to swear by the Quran over the issue of People's Religious Schools.

Actually, this is not surprising for swearing by the Quran is the last resort to determine the truth.

But in the battle between Umno and Pas this sort of religious upmanship was usually the province of the latter.

These challenges from one side are akin to throwing the ball back into the other's court, but it does not change the political equation by a bit.

The Quran, however, is desecrated by mortals in the course of their struggle for power. Kelantan's Umno leaders would vouch for this. They should know.

After all, they have been suffering the effects of Pas' religiosity for the past three political terms, since the 1990 general election.

Of course, they accuse Pas of using the Quran in its political pursuits, while Pas in turn accuses Umno of refusing to abide by the Book.

Kelantan Umno has indeed got the heavy end of the stick in this exchange. But quite a few of Kelantan's political players believe it is not Pas' Islamic credentials that did them in.

Take, Pasir Mas Umno division head Datuk Ibrahim Ali, for instance.

He argues that Umno's inability to win, or at least put up a good show in the State, has a lot to do with national issues.

"In 1990, Umno lost all 13 parliamentary and 39 State seats because of the Team A and Team B crisis. In the 1995 general election, we fared better, winning two parliamentary and seven State seats.

"We thought after the 1995 general election we would perform better but when the 1999 general election came, Umno was in a crisis over the (Datuk Seri) Anwar Ibrahim case, leaving us with only one parliamentary and two State seats."

Ibrahim's reasons for raising this point became clear after the recent visit of deputy Umno president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to Kelantan. He came up with a two-point formula to win back the State - unity and new faces.

It did not go down well with everyone. Some of the State Umno leaders feel he is trying to undermine the veterans and wants to field candidates who failed to prove themselves at the divisional level in the last general election.

Actually, candidacy is the biggest headache among top Umno leaders when it comes to Kelantan.

If they sideline the veterans who have suffered two or three consecutive defeats, the new candidate may be subject to peteh keting (sabotage). If they continue with the veterans, voters will say takde muka lain (it is the same old face).

A few young leaders are being eyed by the top leadership - among them Kota Baru division head Zaid Ibrahim, Peringat deputy head Alwi Che Mud and Tenaga Nasional Bhd chairman Datuk Dr Awang Adek, who hails from Bachok.

There may be more, but these three are seen as the first batch to be inducted into the State leadership to assist liaison chief Datuk Mustapa Mohamed.

Mustapa's position is not strong, something he acknowledges, but observers from outside Kelantan tend to sympathise with him. Few envy him his position.

To many political observers, he is among the new breed of leaders that Umno needs to change its rather battered image.

"It is unlucky for Mustapa that he is from Kelantan. He would have been an asset to us in our State," said a Perak Umno leader.

Mustapa has been the Kelantan Umno chief since 2001 and of late, there seems to be a sense of urgency on his part which is being picked up by national Umno leaders.

"Mustapa is in the final stretch before the elections. If he does not make the necessary moves now, Kelantan Umno can forget about making an impact during polling," said his close aide.

One of the criticisms about Mustapa is that he is too nice, and that is not a nice word where political leadership is concerned.

"Mustapa has to accept that he is the coach of a team which is at the bottom of the league. He cannot do any worse. He might as well do what he believes should be done," said a Kelantan Umno leader who believes in him. But that is easier said than done.

The divisional leaders in Kelantan are like warlords in their constituency, and since the top Umno leadership is determined by delegates from the division, they wield their power shrewdly.

"They have their own patrons in Umno leaders outside Kelantan who are ambitious. If Mustapa tries to be firm with them, they can just snub him and turn to the patrons who will accommodate them.

"These leaders are prepared to spend on divisional elections but always demand financial support when it comes to the general election. Some of the Kelantan Umno division heads are millionaires many times over, but they are not prepared to spend on national politics," said a new Kelantan Umno leader.

To this, an observer said it made sense for them to be prepared to work hard for divisional elections as they could plan for it. If they make it they will get patronage from ambitious national leaders.

"But if they spend for the general election they cannot be sure they will be picked as candidates. That is determined by the Umno president based on recommendations from the State Umno chief."

So the cycle continues and Mustapa definitely has his work cut out for him.

Yet the national leaders, party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Abdullah, seem to be giving more attention to Kelantan of late.

Next week, Dr Mahathir is scheduled to be in Kelantan.

He is staying overnight in the State for the first time since he became Umno president.

It is a point not missed by Kelantan political pundits who believe the Umno president, due to step down in October, wants to give the State one last go.

"Surely Dr Mahathir wants to see Umno win back Kelantan before he steps down. At the same time, surely, Pak Lah (Abdullah) wants to take over the leadership with Kelantan in Umno's fold."

But it will not be that easy. Mustapa surely needs to do something

drastic, and if fielding new faces alongside the veterans can bring in the votes, he should just take the risk and face the consequences.

Kelantan Umno cannot hope for miracles. That is Pas' birthright.