

11/06/2003

Low-profile Johor a hard nut to crack for Opposition

Shahrum Sayuthi

ON the average Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman makes five political statements per month, easily the lowest compared to his counterparts from the other States.

Perhaps it is because the Johor Umno chief, unlike others in his position, resists the temptation of giving unnecessary quotes to the Press just for the sake of getting his name in the papers.

This is probably why he is considered a boring politician, particularly among observers from outside the State. There is also hardly any news from Johor about Umno members resorting to gimmicks just to promote the party, such as attempts to create a new national or world record on something utterly redundant.

Being branded as boring is arguably Johor Umno's strongest point as seen by its 100 per cent record in the last general election.

This is, according to some analysts, due to the fact that fence-sitters - especially in a largely "urbanised" State like Johor - are not so easily swayed by political rhetoric.

They may like to listen to the occasional political ceramah but when it is time to vote what really matters to them is who will deliver the necessary goods.

Johor Umno's success at pitching itself as more of a non-governmental organisation looking after the needs of the masses rather than a political party, has also helped build its solid foundation.

Even during the most trying times since its inception, the party had remained largely intact in the State.

The general election in 1999, which came in the wake of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's ouster, was to many, the hardest test for Umno.

Despite the severe blows it was dealt elsewhere, the party had largely escaped unscathed in Johor with the exception of sustaining a few bruises in certain areas.

Ghani, during a brief interview recently, said the level-headed attitude of the Malay community in Johor had helped the party find its niche through the promotion of moderate thinking and the balanced pursuit of both economic and social development.

"The Malays in Johor have, over the years, overwhelmingly supported Umno as a party as opposed to a support based on the patronage of certain leaders.

"The experience of the 1998-1999 period is ample evidence of this.

"Despite the confusion at the time, the Malays in this State still gave us and our Barisan Nasional partners the necessary votes to make a clean sweep during the election."

On the impending transition of power from Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Ghani said he did not think it would have much impact on the party's status quo in Johor.

"Yes, we are definitely going to miss him (Dr Mahathir), particularly his wisdom in guiding the party as well as the country over the years.

"Despite that, we in Johor have gone through so many changes in the party leadership such as the departure of the likes of Datuk Onn Jaafar and Tan Sri Musa Hitam.

"Those experiences, no matter how difficult they were, had nonetheless proven that our loyalty has always remained with the party."

Typical of his character, Ghani could not help but add at the end of the conversation a statement, half-jokingly though it was, which personifies Johor Umno.

"Actually, I do not want to flatter Dr Mahathir too much by talking about what he had done for us.

"I don't think that is what he wants," he said with a smile.

The strength of Johor Umno may seem to be as solid as a rock, but the threat of being overly confident is there, and this does not escape the attention of those in the opposing camp.

State Pas Youth chief Mazlan Aliman was, in fact, surprisingly quite optimistic about the chances of wresting at least one State seat in the next general election.

He cited the lack of proactive response by Umno to several issues which affects the credibility of the BN-led State Government, such as the handling of the private religious school issue and the losses made by investors in State trust funds - Amanah Saham Johor and Dana Johor.

"I can assure you that they (Umno) are not going to have it easy.

"We have gained some ground in the last general election and the chances of us making a breakthrough this time are very real."