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On making a graceful exit

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FINALLY, Terengganu Umno is showing signs that it realises that it is an Opposition party. At least that is how an Umno member from Johor felt when he read reports of Terengganu Umno information chief Nasir Ibrahim going public with the case of some Pas leaders using zakat (tithe) to fund their children's study abroad.

"To make it sweeter still, Nasir came up with black-and-white proof," he said.

The reference was to the reports that the Terengganu Government allowed zakat money to be used by two Exco members and a former assemblyman for their children's education abroad.

When Nasir made the issue public, acting Pas president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, who is Terengganu Menteri Besar, dismissed the allegation and challenged Umno to prove its case.

Nasir then produced a document to prove his allegations on Friday, so yesterday Hadi defended the use of zakat to fund the education of the children of Pas leaders.

Hadi said the use of the fund for such pursuits was *fisabilillah* or in the path of God. That was one of the eight *asnaf* or categories under which the zakat may be distributed.

The debate on whether the funds were rightfully used or not will turn into a polemic but as pointed out by the Johor Umno man:

"At least, Terengganu Umno did its homework and was not making wild allegations against Pas.

"We can see that Hadi is placed in a difficult position. That is how an Opposition party should operate, and Umno is the Opposition in Terengganu."

It is not surprising that Umno members from outside Terengganu, and Kelantan for that matter, tend to scrutinise every move by their counterparts in the two *Pas*ruled States.

To them, if Pas is comfortably perched over the two States, it can cause trouble in other States.

Also, they contend Pas' grip on the two States is not so much a case of the party being strong and capable, as of Umno being weak.

While disunity is the main factor, the other problem is the refusal of the old guard and defeated candidates to make way for new faces. This point was raised by deputy Umno president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi when he went to Kelantan early this year.

He asked the leaders of Kelantan and Terengganu to be "magnanimous" and give fresh legs a chance to give Pas a run for its money.

Then, Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, during his visit to Kelantan last week, completed the process, announcing several new names to key positions in the State Umno committee.

It was not well taken by some of the "senior" leaders who felt they were sidelined in favour of untested players, or juniors.

Barisan Nasional secretary-general Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat was not so kind in his assessment, saying that this was the result of the "leave it to the Prime Minister" practice.

"We must not forget history. Before the 1990 general election, feedback showed that things were not well in Kelantan.

"However, we kept on accommodating the leaders and their choice of candidates. In the end, we were thrashed."

Mohamed is right. Leaders identified as incompetent, carrying excess baggage, having problems with image or losing their grip on their domain, should know when to step down.

Some choose to hide behind the coattails of the Prime Minister or party president, using the dictum of "if appointed by the Prime Minister, the removal should also be by the Prime Minister".

For Umno, Kelantan and Terengganu should be a lesson well learnt.

As pointed out by Mohamed, in 1990 almost everyone who had some idea of Kelantan politics saw that Menteri Besar Tan Sri Mohamad Yaacob was losing his grip on the State.

"But the top Umno leadership was not prepared to bite the bullet and remove him," said an observer.

"Mat Yaacob himself knew he was drowning but refused to make way, preferring to leave the decision to the Prime Minister."

The observer said history repeated itself in Terengganu in the 1999 general election.

"Almost everyone who knew Terengganu politics saw that Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad had been Menteri Besar for too long and he was not taking the State anywhere.

"The writing was on the wall, but Umno leaders again allowed him to lead. What happened in Kelantan was repeated in Terengganu."

Since the 1999 general election, Umno has made changes to the leadership of several States it controls: Kedah, Perak, Pahang, Selangor, Malacca and Sabah.

In Perlis and Johor, Menteris Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim and Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman are in their second terms, while Negri Sembilan's Tan Sri Isa Abdul Samad has been around for four terms, equivalent to two decades.

There has always been a debate over the wisdom of allowing leaders to head a State or the nation for more than three terms.

"Most of these leaders tend to compare themselves with Dr Mahathir who has been Prime Minister for four terms," said an analyst.

"But they forget Dr Mahathir is an exception, and he, too, has decided to resign by October.

Another observer said the problem with some of the Umno and other leaders from the BN components is that they refuse to believe they have become irrelevant after two or three terms.

"Due to the BN system of accommodating leaders from each component party, it becomes difficult for the Prime Minister to remove them for as long as they lead their party.

"The only thing the Prime Minister can do is to remove them from their Cabinet post. But that too is dicey as it may incur the wrath of members of the component party the leader belongs to."

He cited the case of MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik and his two resignations as Transport Minister.

"If he wants to resign and believes that the time has come for him to leave the Cabinet, he should submit his resignation letter and hold his ground.

"But what he has done is to submit the letter and then leave the decision to the Prime Minister."

The observer, however, repeated that it is difficult for the Prime Minister to deal with component leaders as they are the representatives of their parties.

On that score, Umno leaders at all levels should set the example. They should know when their time is up.

If they don't, then the top Umno leadership should have the conviction to tell them. And tell them they can never be bigger than the nation.

