

28/10/2003

Kedah Umno unity is best gift for Dr M

Abdul Razak Ahmad

THE usual principle governing gifts is that it's the thought that counts. Not so when the receiver is Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The proof lies in a building in Langkawi which houses many of the gifts and souvenirs presented to him throughout his 22 years as Prime Minister.

The 5,332.74 square-metre Galeria Perdana in Kilim features a mind-boggling collection of more than 1,500 items. They range from a Sauber Petronas F1 car and expensive dinnerware to colourful drawings and hand-made knick-knacks, presented by heads of state, governments, corporations, and ordinary Malaysians.

With Dr Mahathir retiring on Friday, many of his admirers, followers and supporters, including those in Kedah, will no doubt want to add to the collection.

Many, especially those in the State Umno and Barisan Nasional, will be wondering what to give Dr Mahathir to show their appreciation.

Some will try to outdo each other. They'd give him the moon and stars if they could, but most will have to settle for giant framed photographs or paintings.

Which is fine, until one takes into account the hundreds of such gifts he has already received, to which the Galeria Perdana collection attests.

It would be better to move beyond the superficial tokens and consider what Dr Mahathir really wants from Kedah.

BN politicians in the State can offer much, especially in light of the upcoming general election.

Maintaining unity is an example. Various factors led to the erosion of support for Umno in Kedah during the 1999 general election, but as Dr Mahathir himself pointed out repeatedly, no one apart from Umno itself could defeat the party.

The factionalism within Kedah Umno, which led to some members actually voting for Pas in a misplaced show of anger, has subsided, but the potential for a flare-up is always there.

State Umno chief and Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain inherited the unenviable task of uniting the warring factions in some of the 15 divisions after the 1999 general election. He has worked tirelessly to repair the damage, but there is only so much he can do.

Unless the warring parties can set aside their differences, get behind Syed Razak and realise how crucial it is to present a unified face in confronting Pas, all the gifts in the world for Dr Mahathir would be useless if he retires to see his home State falling to the Opposition.

The threat is real, despite the advantage which the coalition now has over the Opposition in the State.

Some point out that the demise of former Pas president Datuk Fadzil Mohd Noor and the ascension of Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang have contributed to the party becoming more radical in its outlook, which in turn is alienating the non-Malay voters in Kedah.

But Pas has a large pool of personalities and professionals to choose its candidates from, and there is significant traditional support for the party, especially among the conservative Malay Muslims in the State, of whom there are many.

The State BN also draws comfort from feedback that indicates a major segment of the "fence-sitters" within the Malay electorate who voted for Pas in 1999 is now with the coalition.

But Kedah Pas has an uncanny ability to exploit the slightest misstep by the State administration (both real and imagined), which it harps upon tirelessly to persuade voters to put it in Government.

The arguments favouring the BN and Pas have led to a worrying situation because it indicates a tough fight ahead for both parties.

Dr Mahathir's visits to Kedah after his retirement, either to his favourite island of Langkawi or to Alor Star and Kubang Pasu, will be within this tense political scenario in the State.

He is likely to be received by many of his admirers among the rakyat. The State Umno and BN politicians will be among them, but they have their real work cut out for them.

Being the second son of the State to have risen to become Prime Minister and to have gained such prominence and respect worldwide is just one of Dr Mahathir's many gifts to Kedah.

Rather than reciprocating by following Dr Mahathir around during his visits and showering him with endless superficial gifts, it would probably be much better if they got on with the job of ensuring that the BN retains Kedah and to reverse the defeats they suffered in the 1999 general election.

That should be the gift which they should present to Dr Mahathir. The thought alone will not do.