

Tok Pa feeler to Ku Li: Overture or ploy?

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COMMENT Umno dissident Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah has shadowed his party like a solitary Red Indian on the surrounding hills tracking a posse of cowboys in the valley below as in a western movie.

From time to time, the posse would signal to the scout to come down to parley but the overture is akin to sending up smoke signals in a high wind.

Garbled in transmission, the missives are neither spurned nor studied, with both sides warily opting to resume their uneasy reconnoitering.

wef competitiveness report 070911 mustapa mohamadThe latest feelers put out by Kelantan Umno chief Mustapa Mohamed are couched in similarly ambiguous vein.

National news agency Bernama quotes Mustapa, who is international trade and industry minister, as acknowledging Razaleigh's vast influence in the nation's politics and in Kelantan.

He said his inputs were needed to recapture the state from PAS.

"We will ask for Ku Li's (Tengku Razaleigh's) advice on how Kelantan Umno can step up its efforts for the task," said 'Tok Pa', as the minister is popularly referred to in Umno circles.

Long wait for the top spot

Razaleigh, whose longevity in state and national politics has spanned four decades, is imperturbable in the belief it is his manifest destiny to be prime minister of Malaysia.

It was a sense of noblesse oblige that saw him defer to retiring Prime Minister Hussein Onn's advice he not challenge Hussein's choice of Dr Mahathir Mohamad as his successor in 1981.

Go for the deputy presidency of Umno in the party's polls that year, was Hussein's advice.

NONE 'Ku Li', a term of endearment for the Kelantanese prince, was then the most popular leader in Umno - the top post was his for the taking.

He had been its top vice-president for six years, and was ready at 43 to assume the prize for which he had been honed when as a precocious economics graduate he was made chief executive of Bank Bumiputra, incubator of Malay entrepreneurial success, and later the top man in Petronas, the oil corporation that was the main driver of national economic growth.

Such were the formidable spawning grounds of manifest prime ministerial destiny that Razaleigh felt he enjoyed a matchless edge in the succession sweepstakes, if not in 1981 then much later.

As someone in his early 40s, he felt he could afford to wait. Ambition's fulfillment was adjourned sine die, as they say in parliamentary parlance.

And what an indefinite adjournment it was!

NONEThe Mahathir interregnum went on and on, not only sidetracking Razaleigh, but also shelving three deputy prime ministers - Musa Hitam, Ghafar Baba and Anwar Ibrahim - before Abdullah Ahmad Badawi reached the top of the greasy pole, only to plummet precipitately in less than the time Hussein had had served as the country's third PM since Independence.

Attainment and occupation of the prime ministerial office is a dicey business, but unlike the numbers that come up on a roll of a dice, it does not occur at random.

It is composed in several parts of ambition and in some of cold insistent passion, allied of course to able mastery of political fact and maneuver.

It's his reading of the latter datum that is the basis of Razaleigh's stance of the last four years - a unifying above-the-fray statesmanship - that sees electoral politics sliding into a hung Parliament at the conclusion of 13th general election.

In that hypothetical impasse, Ku Li sees himself as focal point of a government of national unity, incorporating liberal dissidents within Umno-BN, like him, with national concord-desiring elements of Pakatan Rakyat, after the toxic divisiveness of the last decade and half of the Malaysian political saga.

Umno likely to drop Ku Li

For the panning out of that scenario, Razaleigh has to hold on his MP-ship of the seat of Gua Musang in southern Kelantan, something he cannot be sure of if PAS does not give him its tacit backing through the withdrawal of their candidate in the event Umno drops him from its list of nominees.

Razaleigh would then have to stand as an independent, a stance that would only be successful if the contest is a two-cornered fight between him and the Umno nominee, with PAS pulling out.

NONE From that angle, Mustapa's invitation to Razaleigh to collaborate with Umno is seen as an attempt to induce him away from being a PAS proxy in the upcoming elections, a maneuver fraught with complications for Ku Li who has endorsed the PAS-led government's claim to royalties on oil mined off the coast of the state, now the subject of a court battle and the sore sticking point in state-federal relations.

Tok Pa's invitation to Ku Li can be summarised as 'we want your collaboration for control of Kelantan, your espousal of its economic interests be damned.'

In other words, they want collaboration without representation, an oxymoronic position which Kelantan's favoured-son is too principled and too savvy to fall for.

Razaleigh would view Mustapa's transparently partisan play for his collaboration as emblematic of all that is wrong in state and national politics and his leadership of a hypothetical government of national unity as prescription for the malady.

Hence Ku Li's reaction would be - nice try Tok Pa, but no thanks.

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