

**Umno proxies lose in Penang FA polls**  
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COMMENT It may be read as a dress rehearsal of things to come in the upcoming general election but what happened at the Football Association of Penang's internal polls yesterday was interesting on the face of it.

In what was regarded as a proxy battle between Umno-backed candidates and their apolitical challengers, the slate aligned to the former were beaten in the FAP elections that had been deferred from last year because of wrangling between politically-affiliated and game-focused factions.

penang land scam 290708 fairuzThe FAP had become an intractable arena ever since Fairuz Khairuddin (right), the star-crossed deputy chief minister of Penang from PKR, assumed the president's post in late 2008.

The post's previous holder was Koh Tsu Koon, the Gerakan president and chief minister, rendered bereft by the political tsunami of March 2008.

Fairuz made a hash of the job, as he did the DCM's post, compelling his relinquishment of both posts in 2009.

Into the breach, at the FAP's top job, stepped Zahrain, the PKR Penang chief who was soon to run afoul of the Pakatan Rakyat-controlled state government, with consequent detrimental effects to the football body.

The FA was in debt and had petitioned the state government for a grant.

In Fairuz's brief time as FA chief, the request was an attainable RM150,000 which the state dithered in giving because an incompetent Fairuz could not produce the rationalisation for the amount.

zahrain hashim parliament 180310By the time Zahrain (left) took over the reins, the quantum requested had escalated to 10 times the initial amount.

Worse, Zahrain began directing a steady stream of criticism against the administration of Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng and soon widened his targets to include PKR supremo Anwar Ibrahim.

Inevitably, a debt-strapped FAP became a hapless casualty of the internecine political feuds which barely abated with Zahrain's departure from PKR in 2010 and subsequent chumminess with Umno.

Once a football powerhouse

As a result, Penang, once a powerhouse in inter-state football competition, waned as a force, suffering relegation in the Football Association of Malaysia hierarchy of competitions, trundling down from the Super League to the Premier grade before winding up in the third tier (FAM Cup) this season.

It was a situation the game-focused elements of the FAP council found intolerable.

From last year, they intensified their battle to oust the Zahrain-led politically-motivated clique.

They had not only the embarrassment of Penang's relegation to support their argument but also their team's eviction from City Stadium in Georgetown as fodder for their case for new leadership of the FA.

The FA were owing a considerable amount in unpaid rentals to the Penang Municipal Council, owners of City Stadium, which insisted on settlement of the amount as a condition for the state team's use of the stadium for Penang's home matches.

Non-settlement meant the FA had to use the bigger and better equipped Batu Kawan stadium on the mainland where there is no public transport to the venue.

The resultant small crowds aggravated the FA's strapped finances and intensified the slide in their footballers' form.

#### Backroom maneuvers

In the past, matters were never this fraught in the FAP, so the run-up to yesterday's elections was rife with backroom maneuvers and horse trading.

The upshot was a closely watched and contested battle which would determine whether the slide of recent years would be arrested by those motivated by their interest in football or the slump would continue under the troubled charge of the politically motivated.

NONE Incumbent Zahrain Mohd Hashim lost the president's post to challenger Foaz Hamid - the candidate of the factions that were keen on freeing the FA from politics.

For the deputy president's post, Dr Zainuddin Wazir beat Raja Mihir Shah Raja Mustapha, who is a bigwig in the Tanjong division of Umno.

Another casualty was Shukor Salleh, Penang's famous captain and star of its soccer heyday in the 1970s when the state won prized honours in inter-state football competitions.

He was defeated for one of two vice-president's posts, the winners being Amer Yusof and Azizuddin Sharif.

Observers say the results mean Penang FA can soon expect state government help in getting on to an even keel in their finances and their team can resume playing at City Stadium, within reach of diehard fans and among conditions that could spur the effort to restore past glories.



