

Ku Li caught in an Umno trap?
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The result of the 12th by-election since the tumultuous general elections in 2008 is in practical terms irrelevant. Whether or not PAS retains the state seat of Galas in tomorrow's by-election will make no difference to the Islamic party's control of the state legislature. (PAS captured 38 of the 45 state seats in Kelantan, while ally PKR picked up one and Umno, six)

But it will be a test of the influence of Umno's most distinguished internal dissident, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, and his calls for sweeping reform of Umno. Galas is part of Razaleigh's federal parliamentary constituency and is centred on his hometown of Gua Musang in the south of Kelantan. And, together with a federal seat by-election on the same day, the election is expected to play a role in whether Prime Minister Najib Razak will go to national polls in early 2011.

NONEBut interpreting the Galas result will not be easy. The 73-year-old Razaleigh, usually known as Ku Li, is between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, the Kelantan aristocrat knows that his calls for reform of Umno are unlikely to make much progress if the erosion of support for the Umno-led BN ruling coalition that was seen both in the 2008 federal election and in subsequent by-elections is stemmed or reversed.

On the other hand, Razaleigh has no choice but to support his own party and the candidate he himself chose in this local election. Recognising his difficult position, Razaleigh has been playing down the significance of the election. But there is little doubting the attention it has been getting in the media because of him.

Ministers in the government that Razaleigh relentlessly criticises have been trooping to Gua Musang to kiss his hand and try to shore up BN support among the voters. They too doubtless have mixed feelings, one the one hand needing to show Umno making a comeback, on the other worried about the enhanced reputation Razaleigh may acquire should Umno poll well here but not elsewhere.

Odds are stacked against Razaleigh

Razaleigh, once billed as 'bapak ekonomi' or 'father of the Malaysian economy' for his role running Pernas, which was created to encourage Malay-controlled businesses in 1975, as well as creating the national energy company Petronas and then as finance minister, but who has been out of power since narrowly losing to Mahathir Mohamad in 1987, may have little clout in today's Umno or following in its higher echelons.

NONEBut his stinging criticisms of corruption in the BN and of Umno's hypocritical attempts to compete with PAS on religious issues have found a ready audience in a wider community.

For all of Najib's talk of his 1Malaysia slogan, many in Umno continue to pander to more extreme views of Malay and Muslim supremacy that are being peddled by the chauvinist Perkasa movement and aided and abetted by former prime minister Mahathir. Razaleigh's criticisms of the BN have been getting plenty of media coverage, a privilege not so available to opposition parties.

The odds are certainly stacked against a national comeback by Razaleigh. Yet in the event

that Anwar Ibrahim ends back in jail at the same time the opposition still does well in the election, moderate elements from all races might look to him as representative of an older and more tolerant version of Umno as existed, at least in many minds, before Mahathir's reign.

What is far from clear is whether the voters in Galas, and particularly the Chinese (20 percent) and Orang Asli (16 percent) who deserted the BN in the last election come back to it.

NONE On the one hand both are known to respect Razaleigh personally and like his inclusivist views on racial and religious issues. On the other hand the Chinese may have yet to be convinced that at the national level the 1Malaysia slogan is more than rhetoric, or that MCA is a credible member of the BN.

As for the Orang Asli, traditional BN supporters, they have been wooed by a state government which promises to prevent further shrinkage of their traditional lands as a result of acquisitions by members of the Kelantan royal family and other well-placed persons.

As it controls the state government, PAS itself has been buying loyalties through grants of state lands and has been vigorously attacking the federal government for its denial of the Kelantan state government's proper share in oil royalties.

This ill-conceived Mahathir-era punishment for electing an opposition government does Umno no favours. But at least Razaleigh is not tainted by it. As the author of the 1974 legislation that provided for a royalty to the states, he has backed Kelantan's claim against the federal government.

The Ku Li factor

However, tomorrow will test whether support for Razaleigh overrides deep national dissatisfaction with BN, which Razaleigh himself believes shows no signs of abating. Indeed within Umno there are now those who think that it could lose control of the majority of state governments.

galas by election leaflet attacking pakatan 31010 04 But others believe that Najib has sufficiently steadied the Umno/BN ship that he can look to an election in the first half of 2011, perhaps to coincide with state elections due next year in Sarawak.

The economy is doing well enough thanks to high oil, rubber and palm oil prices – and government spending. There have been no major racial incidents such as Hindu temple destructions and cow-head displays to upset minorities.

Anwar is preoccupied with his legal problems and without him the opposition has no unifying focus. So the issue is whether people will just vote against the BN rather than for the opposition. An election two years before one is due would be a risk for Najib, but even modest success would strengthen his position in Umno and in particular make it less difficult to translate the One Malaysia slogan into policies.

However, reading the results of the by-elections will not be easy given the Razaleigh factor in Galas and that politics in ethnically diverse Sabah, as in Sarawak, are not necessarily a guide to what happens in Peninsular Malaysia.

So whatever the result, the significance of a by-election involving just 11,553 voters may be debated long after Thursday.

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