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Can Mahathir swing it in Kedah?

There will be an intense political battle for the Malay heartland state of Kedah where Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's name still carries weight.

It was pitch dark and the tail-lights of the motorcycle convoy looked like a fiery trail along the narrow bund road in Pendang, Kedah.

Sungai Tiang assemblywoman Datuk Suraya Yaakob was riding pillion on one of the motorbikes.

On the way, they dropped by the home of a local surau official whose son has kidney failure. Visiting the sick and elderly is a must for Malay politicians and the stop-over means a few more votes in the ballot box.

The convoy finally arrived at the sandy compound of a house surrounded by padi fields and where a carrom session was going on.

Carrom is the craze here and Suraya was there to give away prizes to the winners of the competition. The prizes were also quaintly local – bags of rice and cooking oil, with some of the winners clad in T-shirt and sarung.

Sungai Tiang, one of two state seats in Pendang, is typical of the Malay heartland seats where parties like Umno and PAS thrive best. There is also something heartwarming about life here – folks do not put on airs, they talk and laugh at the top of their voice, including Suraya whose brief speech was loquacious and entirely in the Kedah dialect.

"I am not a demure person. I have to be *garang* (aggressive) and as loud as them or else they would have *lelong* (auction) me off long ago," she said later.

Ahmad Mohd Isa, the *tok imam* seated beside Suraya, grinned and nodded in agreement. The 71-year-old imam had nursed his invalid wife for six years, often physically carrying her to the mosque so that he could keep an eye on her. She died four years ago and he was recently persuaded to marry a 48-year-old lady.

"No comment," he quickly said when asked about his marriage.

Suraya, a widow for several years, also found love again last year and her wedding was a society event, attended by the Sultan of Kedah who was then Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

The lawyer by training is not your typical kampung YB (Yang Berhormat) or else she would not have survived the last two political tsunamis with a winning majority of 3,000 in 2008 and almost 7,000 in 2013.

Several months ago, when the price of fish shot through the roof, she used her connections to bring in fish at wholesale prices. Her PAS opponents mocked her as "YB *jual ikan*" (fishmonger YB) but it went down very well with the people.

She is vying for a place in the Football Association of Malaysia election and she will crack the glass ceiling if she wins. She is also the president of the National Netball Association and under her, the national netball team is now No. 1 in Asia and No. 19 in the world.

"For the first time, Singapore is below us at No. 20," she said gleefully.

At the height of the Mentri Besar



Heartland politician: Suraya (right) had stood by Mukhriz last year but she got a shock recently when she found out that Mukhriz had been fishing for members and support in her Sungai Tiang constituency. — ERIC TAN / The Star



Dr Leong: 'It is sad that the spine of politicians can bend this way and that way.'



Pharolrazi: The Amanah leader is preparing to take on PAS in the general election.



Azmi: The Kedah activist said that Dr Mahathir cannot be under-estimated.

crisis last year, she stood up for Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir. Everyone thought her career would be over but her rebellious behaviour actually won her more admirers.

But there are very few real friends in politics and Suraya was shocked to find out that Mukhriz has been trying to recruit members for his party from among the Thai community in Sungai Tiang.

"There are 36 seats in Kedah, but he has to fish in my area," she said with a sense of betrayal.

Suraya is also known to be close to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad but the battle lines are clearly drawn in Kedah.

"I never thought it would come to this – Tun trying to topple Umno. All the things he (Dr Mahathir) did to Anwar and now they are like this," she said as she held out her hand, her middle finger twisted over the index finger.

Kedah Umno now regards Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, or "parti bunga raya" as it is known in Kedah, as a bigger enemy than PAS. There has been much speculation about the Mahathir factor in Kedah.

As Gurun assemblyman and state exco member Dr Leong Yong Kong rightly pointed out, Dr Mahathir contributed to Kedah's fall in 2008 when he quit Umno

because of Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

He was back in Umno by 2013 and helped Barisan Nasional recapture Kedah. This time around, he has joined the Opposition to bring down Barisan and Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

Will Dr Mahathir cause the Kedah pendulum to swing again?

"He wants everything his way, to the extent of destroying the party that gave him so much," said Dr Leong, who caused a stir recently when he tried to resign from MCA in protest over the PAS Private Member's Bill.

Kedah people are still trying to wrap their heads around what Dr Mahathir is doing.

"I don't understand Mahathir, Mukhriz would still be the MB if not for him," said Abdullah Bakar, the village head of Kampung Titi Teras.

The former premier's footprint is everywhere, especially in Langkawi. People used to criticise him for his partiality to Langkawi but the island is now Kedah's top international tourist draw.

The Mahathir family has a long history here and the pre-war family home in Alor Setar is now a museum with much of the original furniture intact.

It is an idealised version of what life was like for this famous family

but it is worth a visit.

Not far away is a street mural of Dr Mahathir against a backdrop of the Twin Towers and Proton Saga. It used to be lit by spotlights at night and was a favourite selfie spot for tourists. But politics is a cruel sport and several months ago, the lights went off.

There is talk that Dr Mahathir may contest in Langkawi where he is his party's division chief. The idea of a 91-year-old candidate is quite bizarre but nothing is off the table for Dr Mahathir.

For instance, he braved jeers and insults at a reformasi gathering of hardcore Anwar Ibrahim supporters last week when he appealed to them to work with him.

Umno leaders said the Malay ground shook and rumbled when Dr Mahathir began his attacks against Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. But the mood shifted after Dr Mahathir hooked up with DAP and Lim Kit Siang.

"It is sad when the spine of politicians can bend this way and that way," said Dr Leong. Mukhriz is Parti Pribumi's best bet to win a seat in Kedah. But the former mentri besar can only win if he manages to strike a deal with PAS. PAS leaders have no problems with Mukhriz but they do not really trust Dr Mahathir.

"He will have to fight hard to win. I don't see a landslide victory," said Dr Leong.

His detractors say he is around more often than when he was the Mentri Besar. He has been seen performing subuh prayers at the local surau in Jerlun and joining the locals for breakfast at the warung.

The Opposition's chances in Kedah is uncertain because of the bitter ties between PAS and Amanah.

"We are prepared for three-cornered fights," said Kedah Amanah deputy chairman Datuk

Phahrolrazi Mohamad Zawawi.

He said Pakatan Harapan in Kedah has held four rounds of discussion on seat allocation. A Pakatan secretariat has also been set up headed by Dr Abdul Rahman Ahmad.

Amanah leaders are upfront about the fact that they intend to ride on Dr Mahathir.

"I have always liked Mahathir's speeches. Now it's even better, he says things I like to hear," said Phahrolrazi.

Phahrolrazi was once seen as a rising star and Mentri Besar candidate in PAS. But all that is now in the past, he lives a quiet life and his bungalow home in Alor Setar has been turned into a homestay.

PAS Kedah is a shadow of its former self. Its leaders now comprise mostly young, fresh faces because the established ones have left for Amanah. But the core support is still there.

Kedah is arguably the most Malay state on the west coast. Malays make up 83% of Kedah's two million population.

"The Mahathir factor cannot be discounted but I'm not sure they have enough bullets. I don't sense a wave, just a lot of noise," said Azmi Hamid who heads a Kedah-based NGO known as Teras.

There is also the sense that this time around, Umno has the support of the Malay elites in Kedah and they include businessmen, civil servants and even the palace.

The Sultan of Kedah Tuanku Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah is back in Istana Anak Bukit after his sojourn as the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. Last Tuesday, he arrived at the state government complex in a gleaming Rolls-Royce Phantom for a special royal briefing on Kedah's development.

They had rolled out the royal yellow carpet for him and even the lifts were fitted with "Daulat Tuanku" signs. No one does it better than Umno when it comes to taking care of the Malay Rulers.

The Sultan is seen as a kind and gentle soul and he is loved by his subjects regardless of race. Many Kedahans like his speeches because they feel that his words come from his heart.

It is also no secret that the Sultan is not impressed by Dr Mahathir's effort to bring down Najib whom he is extremely fond of.

However, Umno politicians do not badmouth Dr Mahathir even though he runs down their party at every opportunity.

Suraya said it is not the Malay culture to do that and, besides, they do not want to alienate the older generation who still have a connection to the former premier.

However, when Suraya visited an elderly constituent recently, the bed-ridden lady, who is more than 90 years old, had held her hand and said in a frail voice: "Please find a way for me to go and vote. Tunku Abdul Rahman told us we have to support Umno until the day we die."