

PM in a delicate situation

The Star - 7/11/2021 pg. 11

Ismail Sabri may be hoping for a friendly match as the parties competing in the Melaka polls are his partners in Putrajaya but enemies in the state.

Analysis by JOCELINE TAN

AN AWKWARD situation lies ahead for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob as the battle for Melaka begins.

The parties slugging it out after nominations tomorrow are his partners in Putrajaya but enemies in Melaka, and Ismail Sabri will need to apply his diplomatic skills to stay above the fray.

He ended the last Cabinet meeting with a gentle reminder to his ministers not to go overboard when campaigning in Melaka.

He asked the ministers and deputy ministers not to indulge in name-calling, use harsh words or run each other down because they still have to come back and sit at the same table in Putrajaya.

Ismail Sabri admitted that he cannot control those down the line from going all out, but he urged the ministers to stay moderate.

He had tried to find a way out of the debacle, but he said the presidents of Umno, PAS and Bersatu are not part of the Cabinet, and they have their own stand about cooperation between the partners.

Ismail Sabri was spot on because a day later, his party president Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who is currently in Germany for medical treatment, fired off a statement calling out Bersatu of being

afraid of its own shadow.

He was cheesed off with Bersatu leaders who had criticised Umno for not coming on board with Perikatan Nasional.

He said Umno had not forgotten how Bersatu joined Pakatan Harapan to slander and topple Barisan Nasional in the 14th General Election.

"The PM wants to see a friendly match but there is too much ill feelings between Umno and Bersatu. It will get ugly," said former Kapar Umno division head Datuk Faizal Abdullah.

Every party in this three-sided race is going into battle with their own set of problems and baggage.

With the ban on campaigning, this could be the first election that relies on social media and phone texting in a major way.

And this is where it can get nasty because it is easy to slander, make wild claims and play the racial game in cyberspace.

Many voters would have already received a steady stream of campaign-related messages, memes and caricatures attacking this and that party.

For instance, the attacks against Bersatu's Datuk Mas Ermieyati Samsudin have grown nastier after being portrayed as Perikatan's chief minister candidate.

Mas Ermieyati was the third

Umno MP to jump to Bersatu in 2018. Among the first to welcome her on Twitter was Muar MP and then Bersatu youth chief Syed Saddiq Abdul Rahman, whose recent condemnation of Pakatan's decision to absorb Datuk Seri Idris Haron and gang, is rather hypocritical.

Resentment over Mas Ermieyati's betrayal bubbled to the surface again because the Umno crowd saw it as Bersatu pouring vinegar on their wounds.

"Are you surprised Umno is for going after her? She was the leader of Puteri Umno. Is that a good example to set for young women?" asked Faizal.

There have been accusations that Pakatan is most affected by the ban because the coalition relies on rallies that draw the crowd.

But the ban may be a blessing in disguise for Pakatan.

The pandemic is likely to keep the urban Chinese crowd at home while the angry mood that used to bring out ceramah-goers has subsided.

Moreover, DAP star Lim Guan Eng and his father Lim Kit Siang have too much baggage in Melaka, where they were responsible for the exit of a number of reliable and popular leaders.

The ban may save the party from embarrassment because their ceramah are unlikely to bring out the crowd this time.

In fact, the ban will hit Umno quite badly. It cannot splash money on dinners and their Wanita Umno workhorses may not be able to go door-to-door to meet voters.

Even the party's crowd magnet Datuk Seri Najib Razak may not be able to do his usual 'Bossku' thing without risking action from the authorities.

Despite the election being a three-sided battle, the real fight is between Pakatan and Barisan.

"It will be a photo finish," said Idris, who is arguably the most controversial politician in Melaka today.

Perikatan, by most accounts, is unlikely to do well, let alone form a government with the first woman chief minister.

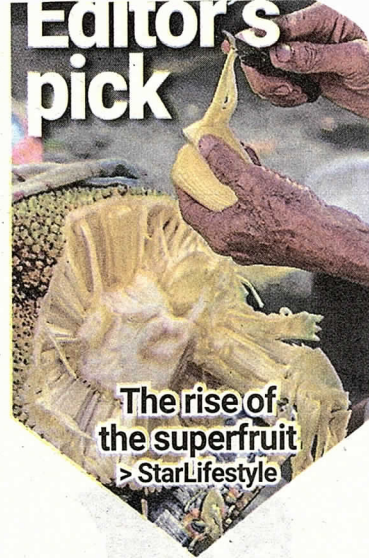
PAS could have been the king-maker - while winning a couple of seats - had it cut a deal with Umno by using its own famous "white moon against a green sea" logo.

But the party is now demoted to the role of a spoiler.

The Chinese are still very much in the DAP corner.

Ask any local Chinese person in the kopitiam who they are rooting for, and they will show you the finger - not the middle finger but an upright index finger denoting the DAP rocket symbol.

DAP's opposition to accepting the four assemblymen who withdrew



from the state government shows that it is willing to listen to its base and act accordingly.

A lot of blame was levelled at the powerful state Umno chief Datuk Seri Rauf Yusoh, the person behind the reason Idris pulled out from the state government.

But Rauf, whose nickname in Melaka Umno is "King", is somebody who can make things happen, and he needs to make an Umno win happen or else his political career will be affected.

However, the heaviest burden lies on the shoulders of the Prime Minister.

A win for Umno will strengthen Ismail Sabri's leadership and his ambitions to be the next Umno president.

But a win may also shake his hold over his team of rivals in the Federal Government.

The views expressed here are the writer's own.