

PMX turns his charm on Kelantan

Will the promise to resolve the decades-long water problem in the PAS-run state swing seats to Anwar's government?

ONE of Umno's most gifted orators, Datuk Seri Alwi Che Ahmad recently described himself as "paper lama" or old newspapers after deciding to retire from politics.

The Kok Lanas assemblyman from Kelantan, who is a land surveyor, has spent almost all his adult life in politics.

His party leaders want him to defend the seat in the state election, but Alwi told them: "I am in a 'sampan' (boat), the sea is full of big waves. You want me to go out and catch fish, but my sampan does not even have an engine.

"Let someone younger take over. It's better I buy 'ikan tenggiri' (Spanish mackerel) in the market than go fishing in the storm."

It was a telling analogy of what Umno is up against in Kelantan, which PAS claims to be its "serambi Mekah" or the gateway to Mecca.

Kok Lanas is one of three state seats in the Ketereh parliamentary constituency, which was seen as an Umno stronghold until former Umno strongman Tan Sri Annuar Musa was dropped in the last general election.

As a result, the seat fell to a retired general from Bersatu who won by a stunning 23,000-vote majority.

Annuar is reportedly about to join PAS while his only son, Afiq Amani Annuar, who is Ketereh Umno Youth chief, may contest Kok Lanas in the state election.



Analysis

Alwi, who has been best friends with Annuar since their Royal Military College years, thinks Afiq Amani is ideal for the seat.

It is unclear how this awkward situation involving father, son and BFFs will turn out, but what is clear is that Umno is at its weakest in Kelantan.

Umno lost every single parliament seat last year and the green wave submerged even Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah in Gua Musang.

Alwi, 66, is now one of seven Umno assemblymen adrift in a sea of green.

Can their sampan survive the state election? Only Galas and Kota Lama look winnable for Umno.

Kota Lama, in Kota Baru, is about 30% Chinese and is winnable if Umno and Pakatan Harapan supporters come together.

Galas, in Gua Musang, has a substantial number of Chinese and Orang Asli voters and the recent appointment of Tengku Razaleigh as Umno adviser was

probably to secure his assistance to hold on to the seat.

"Some seats in Kelantan can swing based on personality alone. But the thing to watch out for this time is what the combined numbers of Umno and-Pakatan can bring to the scorecard," said lawyer Ainul Aizat Ahmad Ishak.

Ainul Aizat, who had worked with former Jeli MP Datuk Seri Mustapa Mohamed, said the one-to-one contests expected in the state polls could help Umno and Pakatan in some seats.

Moreover, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim got such an impressive welcome at his Madani open house in Kota Baru.

It was a massive crowd, the mood was fantastic, people were pushing to take pictures of the Prime Minister with their hand-phones and, most of all, there were many young people.

It was quite a charm offensive because no other prime minister in recent times has drawn such an animated crowd in the PAS state.

More recently, Anwar made an impassioned speech, vowing to spare no effort to resolve their decades-long water woes.

He said it had nothing to do with the state polls and declared that he had raised the matter during an audience with the Sultan of Kelantan.

There will surely be Kelantan folk who are willing to give him a chance while others think the

pledge will go the same way as promises to abolish highway tolls and bring down petrol prices.

According to a former ministerial aide, it is dangerous to listen only to good news or as the Malay slang goes, "*termakan spin sendiri*" (buy into one's own spin).

Moreover, the federal government may have delivered yet another silver bullet to Perikatan Nasional in the form of the "Allah" issue.

The media has been guarded in reporting the issue, but for the Muslim community, it is like a tsunami gathering force under the sea as it approaches land.

Elections in Kelantan, said the former aide, are often decided by the "anak-anak Kelantan perantauan" or the Kelantan diaspora.

There are some two million outstation voters who do not experience the frustrations of the folk back home - poor water supply, uncollected rubbish and rising quit rent.

They return to vote for PAS although in the last general election, many of them did not bother to go back because they were so confident that PAS would win.

"Kelantanese are everywhere. The development slogan does not really sell in Kelantan because those outstation send money home and the locals like their pace of life," said Kelantan-born political risk consultant Ng Yeen

Seen, whose family still resides in Kota Baru.

Many Kelantanese also believe that PAS belongs to Kelantan and must be defended at all costs.

Unlike Umno, many PAS assemblymen are not "weekend YBs" and they actually live among the people.

The ageing Mentri Besar Datuk Ahmad Yakob often rides a bicycle to the mosque although the younger YBs prefer posh vehicles.

PAS is not taking anything for granted this time.

Their fiercest ceramah speaker Datuk Panglima Perang Nassuruddin Daud has been despatched all over the country to meet the Kelantan diaspora, to brainwash them and inspire them to return to vote.

Nassuruddin is known for his "*mulut kasar*" or rough way of speaking, but he is wildly popular, so much so that the Kelantan palace conferred on him the Datuk Panglima Perang or "commander of war" honorific.

Politics in Kelantan is often quite emotional because of the mix of religion and the parochial psychology of its people, which PAS leaders have tapped into over the years.

Can the combined effort of Umno and Pakatan loosen the grip or will it drown in the green wave?

The views expressed here are the writer's own.