

Umno missing religious edge in Kelantan, says Mustapa
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By Shannon Teoh

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 13 — Datuk Seri Mustapa Mohamed has admitted that Umno's efforts to regain Kelantan are being hampered by the lack of religious scholars in the party's state leadership.

The Kelantan Umno chief told The Malaysian Insider in a recent interview that while it could channel federal resources to develop the east coast state, the shortage of "ulama (Muslim scholars)" was a "challenge for us" in "deeply religious Kelantan."

"For that reason, PAS has a strong foothold in Kelantan," the international trade and industry minister said of the Islamist party that has governed the mostly rural state since 1990.

"On our side, we do not have as many religious scholars. That's a challenge for us. We've not been able to attract people with a solid religious grounding to be in the Kelantan Umno leadership," Mustapa said.

PAS spiritual leader Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat has maintained his popularity as a symbol of PAS's brand of Islam — religiosity and moderation in governance — since becoming menteri besar over two decades ago.

"I can bring up many issues on mismanagement by the state government, but at the end of the day, what people will see is me attacking an old man wearing a jubah (robe) in the Dewan Negeri (state assembly)," state opposition leader Datuk Che Alwi Ahmad told The Malaysian Insider recently.

Nik Aziz continues to serve as a symbol of PAS's brand of Islam. Politicians also told The Malaysian Insider that PAS's success or failure in implementing hudud, the Islamic penal law, in Kelantan will serve as an indicator of Malay voter support there ahead of a general election expected to be called soon.

But state Umno leaders have also said that economist Mustapa, who is their MB candidate of choice, has a "squeaky-clean" and "scandal-free" image, and have made it a point to burnish the minister's credentials "every chance" they get in forums and even public events.

Mustapa, who is Jeli MP, has been working with Umno officials on its "Gelombang Merah" campaign to take back the state.

The economist, with a first class honours degree in Economics from University of Melbourne, Australia and a Masters in Economic Development from the Boston University, also said in the interview that PAS is "running out of ideas" to spur the state's economy.

"The people who have been driving the economy are civil servants, small traders and people who work outside of Kelantan.

"This remittance economy is big in Kelantan. Relative to local population, Kelantan has biggest percentage of people working outside the state as compared to other peninsular

states. There are hardly any job opportunities in the private sector," said Mustapa, who has been a Cabinet minister since 2004.

He said this showed Kelantan has huge potential to be developed but "a lot of injection and transfers from the federal government" are needed to overcome the "natural disadvantages such as distance, no international airport or seaport."

Mustapa was also the clear candidate for MB in 2004 when he won the Ayer Lanas state seat, but Umno fell just one seat short of a majority in the state assembly.

Deputy Finance Minister Datuk Awang Adek Hussin took over as MB-designate in 2008 but Umno won just six of 45 seats, handing PAS a two-thirds majority in the assembly.

Despite winning most of the seats, the Pakatan Rakyat pact only got 56 per cent of the popular vote to BN's 43 per cent in Kelantan in Election 2008, pushing Umno to believe it can retake the Malay heartland state in the next general election.

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