

In Kelantan, newbie menteri besar seen as divisive force

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The Kelantan PAS government is said to be in troubled waters with factionalism, just nine months after it was formed to succeed party icon Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat who retired as menteri besar after 23 years.

His successor Datuk Ahmad Yakub's standing among influential factions in the state party chapter is so bad that some of the leaders warn that the Kelantan government could go the way of the previous PAS Kedah government – which was brought down by infighting and kicked out by voters.

The two main factions in Kelantan PAS are those aligned to Deputy Menteri Besar Datuk Mohamad Amar Nik Abdullah and former senior executive councillor Datuk Husam Musa, who is seen as a progressive in the conservative Islamist party.

Party officials have described the situation as dire enough to require intervention from the PAS central committee to make peace between the factions and save the administration.

The only thing going for it, said Kelantan PAS veterans, is the lacklustre Kelantan Umno, which is too divided and disorganised to take advantage of the Islamist party's internal woes in the state.

However, they said, it was only a matter of time before internal divisions eat away at the Kelantan PAS government's foundations in a way that Umno could not.

There had always been factions in the state chapter, even during Nik Aziz's rule but the PAS spiritual leader exuded a humble yet steely aura that commanded respect from all of them and ensured that their rivalry did not get out of control.

Nik Aziz's successor, Ahmad, however, does not appear to possess the elder politician's qualities, resulting in fighting among the factions coming out in the open.

It began when the new state PAS government was formed after the 13th general election and Husam was dropped from the exco list.

According to Amar, Husam's name had been rejected by the Kelantan palace.

This rationale did not go down well with Husam's supporters, most of whom are young professionals in influential positions in the civil service, state government-linked companies and its small private sector.

Soon after, some of Husam's supporters also lost their positions, the latest being Sultan Ismail Petra International Islamic College (KIAS) deputy registrar Che Ibrahim Mohamad.

Che Ibrahim and Husam were college buddies in Universiti Malaya. Che Ibrahim's termination letter was signed by Amar, who is also KIAS chairperson, state PAS officials disclosed to The Malaysian Insider.

Angered over a dismissal that he felt was unjustified and from a school he helped set up, Che Ibrahim and some of his friends staged a protest in front of KIAS.

Before that, some of Husam's other supporters were dismissed, such as Asrul Afendi (IT officer at KGT Sdn Bhd and Husam's former press secretary), Khir Zahri Abdul Ghani (Tabung Tok Kenali manager) and Fauzi Mohamad (PMBK Sawit manager). Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Ahmad Yakub is unable to hold the factions in Kelantan together. – The Malaysian Insider pic, March 1, 2014.

Since his appointment to the exco in 2004, Husam has had a big influence on state policies, with some of them capturing the imagination of Kelantanese, both in the state and those who have migrated outside to work.

It is said that Kelantan has the largest number of outstation voters who make the trip home to cast their ballots during an election.

The campaign to get the federal government to pay Kelantan oil royalties is Husam's brainchild. It is a hit with the Kelantanese as seen in the many red "R" stickers stamped on cars all over the country.

Another of Husam's endeavours that has made him more fans (and critics) is the "People's Highway" project from Gua Musang to the state capital Kota Baru.

The ongoing project, funded from public donations, aims to expand the two-lane artery that connects Kelantan to Kuala Lumpur into a four-lane highway.

Disenchantment with how the current administration is treating Husam has fed the belief among his supporters that the current Kelantan administration has to go.

Husam has openly criticised the state government in state legislative sittings last October.

Former Kelantan legislative speaker Datuk Wan Rahim Wan Abdullah urged the PAS central leadership to intervene to tamp down the political fires in Kelantan before it was too late.

Wan Rahim said when Husam turned up the heat last October, a visit by PAS president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang managed to calm everyone's tempers.

"The Kelantan administration respects the PAS central leadership. So I feel that the central leadership needs to do something," said the Kota Baru PAS division chief.

Wan Rahim also urged the PAS central committee to reactivate its steering committee which, in 2012, attempted to resolve the PAS Kedah government's crisis.

A former member of the steering committee Datuk Kamarudin Jaffar agreed that Kelantan needs the attention of the PAS national leadership before things get out of control.

Another Kelantan PAS veteran Hashim Omar said the national leadership could not assume that Kelantanese support towards PAS was a given, regardless of the quality of the state government.

"If the public sees that we cannot get along, how are we going to get their support?" he asked

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