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A Bernama Year-Ender

POLITICS CONTINUE TO DOMINATE THE MALAYSIAN SCENE IN 1996

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KUALA LUMPUR; -- Despite the rapid infrastructural and economic development that the country is undergoing, politics continues to take centre-stage in the daily life of the nation throughout 1996.

Although it was not an election year, 1996, like any other previous year, was marked by various political changes and episodes which had a bearing on every citizen directly or indirectly.

The tussle for top Umno posts and the long drawn-out political turmoil in the Pas-ruled Kelantan dominated the year's political scenario.

The contest for the top Umno posts, except for the President and the Deputy President posts, in October was of great significance, as its results were considered indicators on the nation's future leaders.

The tussle for the three Vice-Presidency slots, for instance, saw how an incumbent who garnered the highest votes in the 1993 party election, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, was relegated to the sixth place in the seven-cornered fight.

It also saw the re-election of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Datuk Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi to the post after losing it in the 1993 party polls.

Two other incumbents, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhd Taib, successfully retained their seats, and if the number of votes obtained was any indication, Najib who came out top by garnering 1,483 votes was no doubt placed in a very most comfortable position, at least in term of popularity.

Traditionally, but not always necessarily so, the Vice-President who polled the highest votes stands a better chance of automatically moving up the party ladder in the event of the deputy president's post being vacant. And, normally an Umno's deputy president is also appointed the Deputy Prime Minister.

The race for the vice-presidency also resulted in the defeat of two other leaders -- Perak Menteri Besar Tan Sri Ramli Ngah Talib and Defence Minister Datuk Syed Hamid Albar. Had it not been for the power vested in the party's president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to appoint extra Supreme Council members, the two who entered the fray for broke would have been deprived of the opportunity to sit among their peers in the party's policy-making body.

In yet another upset, the party elections also saw the defeat of Tan Sri Abdul Rahim Tamby Chik and Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz as the head of the Youth and Wanita wings, respectively.

All in all, the clamp-down on campaigning and money politics made the Umno party election this year a much quieter and sober affair.

On other front, 1996 was not at all a smooth sailing year for Pas which had been in control of the Kelantan state government since 1990.

The Islamic-based party had been hanging on to stay in power in the only opposition-held state, in the face of continued onslaught and challenge from various quarters, particularly its former ally, the defunct Parti Melayu Semangat 46.

The trouble started soon after the 1995 general election when the then S46 accused Pas of failing to abide by the terms of agreement pertaining to power sharing and formulation of state policies.

The hostilities between the two grew in intensity when the president of S46 Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, announced sometime in the middle of the year

that he was dissolving the party to return to Umno with his followers.

Pas retaliated by severing all ties with S46, including the removal of all portfolios from the four S46 state Executive Councillors. However, it could not terminate them as Exco members because the Sultan of Kelantan refused to grant audience to its Menteri Besar Datuk Haji Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat. The state constitution stipulates that the consent of the ruler is required, either for the appointment or termination of the Exco members.

The party was officially dissolved in October and Tengku Razaleigh with reportedly some 200,000 members applied to join Umno. However, so far only 10,000 of them had been admitted while the rest of the applications are being finalised.

Three of the four Exco members finally tendered their resignation with effect from Dec 9 after being directed to do so by the Umno Supreme Council. Another seat became automatically vacant when the fourth member, the Pulai Condong State Assemblyman, Mohd Nor Ahmad, died of heart attack six days earlier.

The feud between Pas and the Palace was yet another sad episode that Kelantan had to endure. It all started when Pas decided to amend the state constitution to re-define the role of the Sultan and to abolish the ruler's immunity, claiming that the Palace had been meddling in the state administration.

While the resignation of the ex-S46 Exco members from the state government was somewhat a relief, Pas' real problem is far from over. Nik Aziz had openly tendered his apologies to the Sultan if he was to blame for the rift, but most observers doubted that Pas could easily get the royal consent to fill up the four vacant Exco seats with its own State Assemblymen.

Then, there was also talks that Pas and Umno were discreetly negotiating towards forming a coalition government at the state level. Nik Aziz and Rural Development Minister Datuk Annuar Musa, in his capacity as the state Deputy Umno Liason Chief, were reportedly very much in favour of the move, despite strong opposition from certain quarters within Umno and the Pas Youth themselves.

Until the outcome of the negotiation are yet to be known, it is only natural that Umno will continue to pile pressure on Pas, and their strength will be initially put to test when the two parties go to the poll in the Pulai Condong by-election on Jan 6. Nomination day for the election has been set for Dec 26.

The year was also not an encouraging one for another opposition party, the DAP. Its biggest setback came when its only two State Assemblymen in Negeri Sembilan quit the party to join the MCA last month, leaving the assembly completely in the hands of the BN.

Across the South China Sea, 1996 was yet another victorious year for BN in Sarawak. Except for the defeat of the SUPP president Tan Sri Wong Soon Kai, who was also the Deputy Chief Minister, by a DAP candidate, it was returned comfortably to power by winning 57 out of 62 seats in the State Assembly in September.

For Sabah, 1996 was another action-packed year for the ruling BN to consolidate its position, in the light of the prevailing threat by the opposition Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) to stage a come-back.

Among the most effective measure taken by the BN central leaders towards this end was the fulfilment of its election pledge to rotate, every two years, the state Chief Ministership between the component parties that represent the three main ethnic groups, the Muslim Bumiputeras, the Non-Muslim Bumiputeras and the Chinese.

Although the rotation system was initially met with some opposition, particularly from Umno itself, the issue was amicably solved by Dr Mahathir

and Datuk Yong Teck Lee, the president of Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP), was appointed the new Chief Minister in May, about two months after Umno's Datuk Salleh Tun Said Keruak's term ended.

The year also saw the reinstatement of former Agriculture Minister, Datuk Seri Sanusi Junid, to mainstream politics when he was made the new Menteri Besar of Kedah in place of Tan Sri Osman Aroff.

Sanusi's appointment was initially met with stiff resistance from at least 22 state assemblymen. However, Dr Mahathir once again displayed his political acumen and resolved the issue amicably.

The year also saw how Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik staved off a challenge for the top post of Gerakan by the Member of Parliament for Batu, Datuk Joseph Chong. Chong was disqualified before the ballots were cast and subsequent events led him to resign from the party while keeping his parliamentary seat.

Except for all these, 1996 was considerably a quiet year for the other BN component parties. Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik and Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu are still firmly at the helm of MCA and the MIC, respectively, although the year also saw some changes in the MCA leadership, which included the promotion of the Minister of Human Resources Datuk Lim Ah Lek as the new Deputy President following the retirement of incumbent Datuk Lee Kim Sai.

Otherwise, 1996 was generally another excellent year for Malaysians in their quest for peace, harmony and prosperity. -- Bernama

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