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A clear message for Government despite Sungai Bakap win

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SPEAKING on Saturday night after the Barisan Nasional retained the Sungai Bakap State seat albeit with a reduced majority in the by-election, Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon agreed that "there is definitely a message in the results" for the Government.

That the BN won came as no surprise. Sungai Bakap has traditionally been a safe BN seat and a Gerakan stronghold. Of the 16,589 voters 7,957 are Malays, 5,904, Chinese and 2,727, Indian.

Malay majority areas always come through for the BN and although at the start of the campaign period some people in the BN were talking about a 50:50 chance, most predicted a win but with a reduced majority.

However, the BN had not anticipated a majority of only 1,440, a drop of 3,887 votes compared to the 5,327 vote majority the coalition received in the 1995 general election.

Newcomer Lai Chew Hock, 32, polled 5,010 votes against DAP candidate's Goh Kheng Huat's 3,570. Independent Abu Harith Ahmad who fought under the umbrella symbol received a surprising 1,758 votes. Another independent, K.Ganesh, who withdrew in favour of the BN on Tuesday, lost his deposit after getting 26 votes. There were 230 spoilt votes.

The turnout of 10,594 or 63.87 per cent was lower than the 71.91 per cent voter turnout in the 1995 general election. However, by-elections usually draw fewer voters.

In the 1995 general election, the BN's Ooi Theng Bok secured a 5,327 majority over the DAP's Abdul Razak Abdul Hamid in a straight fight. The by-election was caused by Ooi's death in a road accident on Sept 23.

Goh was the first to enter the main counting centre at the Jawi multi-purpose hall accompanied by local party leaders on Saturday night. Lai arrived a little later wearing a garland and accompanied by Koh. By then the unofficial results had been announced and Lai had been garlanded by supporters outside the centre.

Koh's countenance showed he was none too pleased with the result although Lai, who seems to perpetually wear a smile, was happy.

The BN had only received 47 per cent of the vote. Given the fact that Sungai Bakap has always been considered a safe seat and a Gerakan stronghold, there clearly was something wrong.

Goh and DAP Penang leader Teoh Teik Huat said they had achieved what they set out to do - a reduced majority for the BN to show that "it should not become arrogant".

Koh admitted that he would have preferred a bigger majority but accepted the voters's decision.

Asked if the reduced majority showed a general dissatisfaction with the BN Government, Koh said: "I would not venture to say that there is a general dissatisfaction. However, there definitely is a message.

"The BN will view the result seriously and analyse it to ascertain our weaknesses and shortcomings so that the BN can further improve its service to the people and bring about greater development and a better performance."

Koh said more than 2,000 voters in the last general election had stayed away and Abu Harith had snatched 1,758 votes to give the BN the reduced majority.

The BN had been fighting to ensure a high majority. No one worked harder than Koh who was in the constituency every day during the campaign period.

He sometimes slept at the Jawi Inn so that he could attend ceramah at night and wake up early to campaign.

His strategy of getting State BN component party leaders to follow him on his ceramah to stage a show of unity served him well.

When it was clear that Abu Harith, 40, a former Parti Melayu Semangat 46 State youth leader was having an impact on Malay voters, Umno big-guns were called into play.

Umno deputy president and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, vice presidents Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and supreme council members Datuk Mohamed Rahmat and Datuk Mustapa Mohamed were involved in a frenzy campaigning.

Others who campaigned were Deputy Transport Minister Datuk Ali Rustam and Umno Youth deputy chief Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein and former Federal Minister and ex-S46 head Tengku Tan Sri Razaleigh Hamzah.

Anwar even went to the extent of saying that those who voted for Abu Harith were traitors to the Malay race.

There is no doubt that the presence of these Umno stalwarts helped attract the Malay vote for the BN.

However, the sizeable 1,758 votes garnered by Abu Harith has shown Umno was unable to break into a certain section of Malay voters, many of whom are Pas sympathisers. Abu Harith also appealed to local sensitivities when he said Sungai Bakap, being a Malay majority area, should have a Malay representative.

Umno went all out to defeat Abu Harith but the results show he still has a core of supporters who are dissatisfied not only with the BN, but also with Umno.

There is still talk that Abu Harith and some of his supporters were denied Umno membership even though the agreement during the disbanding of S46 was that all S46 members would be accepted into Umno. This was probably Abu Harith's way of showing his displeasure with Umno.

Although the DAP proudly claims that it has achieved its goal of whittling down the BN majority, credit should really go to Abu Harith. The DAP only increased its number of votes by 276 compared to the 3,294 votes Abdul Razak received in 1995.

In three Chinese majority areas, the DAP received high scores and in a couple of Malay majority areas votes for the BN almost equalled those received by the DAP and and Abu Harith.

In one Indian majority area, the DAP did well, underscoring the fact that Indians in the constituency, and the State, are not overly happy with the Government.

The withdrawal of Ganesh from the race in favour of the BN, after the Government agreed to expedite the construction of the Jawi Tamil school which had been razed by fire two years ago and its promise to help provide funds for three temples, greatly helped the BN.

The reduction of the increase in the annual driving licence fee from RM50 to RM30 and talk of a review of the highway toll rates also favoured the BN. Another factor was the renewed popularity of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad following a dip in his popularity when the currency crunch came.

Teoh said the BN had campaigned that a vote for the BN was a vote to strengthen Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the BN programmes.

Therefore, he said, the reduced majority was "clearly a vote of no confidence in Dr Mahathir."

He added: "The reduced majority of the BN should serve as a mid-term review of the BN Government's achievements since 1995.

Former DAP Assemblyman and active leader Phee Boon Poh observed: "In

nine days, the Government tarred 38 roads, cleared drains so that floods would be alleviated, took steps to rebuild the Tamil school which had been forgotten all this while and promised other measures to overcome local problems.

"It can deliver. But does it take a by-election and 2 1/2 years to deliver. Why can't it do things faster for the people? We are happy that as a result of the by-election and our fight, the people have benefited. That is what we wanted."

And Koh is taking all this very seriously. There is little doubt that he will tackle head on the sore spots to prepare for the next general election. For, if the dissatisfaction is not tackled, this safe seat may be safe no longer.

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