

13/08/1997

After tasting victory at Semerak, BN must now keep its promises

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PAS, with its supporters confident that their party would once again outmanoeuvre Barisan Nasional, came prepared to celebrate the Semerak by-election victory last night.

Clad in the traditional serban and white skull caps and carrying flags of different sizes, they waited eagerly for the announcement of the result.

Adjacent to the main counting centre, Pas party workers were seen getting the PA system ready for the party leaders to deliver victory speeches.

The moment did not come.

When the first announcement was made at 7pm for the Bukit Tanah polling stream, BN was leading by 17 votes. One hour later, it had stretched its lead to over 100 votes.

A Pas supporter was heard confiding to a friend that their party would take over the lead once more results were announced.

Again, that did not happen.

At 8.30pm, it dawned on Pas supporters that the party was going to lose its stronghold.

Looks of disbelief showed on their faces and many started to question the reason for the defeat, their first since coming to power seven years ago. Pas leaders refused to comment when approached by reporters and many were seen shaking their heads.

BN supporters at the counting centre started to swell in numbers when word spread that the coalition would win the by-election.

The confirmation came when Kamarudin Mohd Nor, accompanied by State BN chairman Datuk Annuar Musa and other BN leaders, arrived at the counting centre.

Kamarudin secured 5,370 votes against his closest rival Wan Fauzi Husain who polled 4,592 votes. Another candidate, Mohd Din Nizam Din from Angkatan Keadilan Insan Malaysia, managed only 27 votes and lost his deposit.

BN supporters and leaders were jubilant because the victory not only avenged the humiliating defeat to Pas in the Pulai Chondong by-election early this year, but it showed that Pas was not invincible in Kelantan.

In the run-up to the by-election, no one dared to predict a BN victory.

Those who were brave could only suggest a victory of less than 300 votes, but the majority agreed that it would be just another defeat for BN, just like in the 1995 general election when Pas won by a majority of 248 votes.

What was most significant about the BN victory was that it not only managed to get the full support of Umno supporters in Semerak, but also that of the former S46 and even Pas supporters.

The BN had been well prepared. Annuar, State BN deputy chairman Datuk Mustapa Mohamed, Umno supreme council members Datuk Zainal Abidin Abdul Kadir and Datuk Ibrahim Ali and other divisional leaders virtually camped in Semerak to campaign.

They made house visits on foot and held ceramah each night to woo voters. Umno deputy president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim took part in three ceramah in one night.

Kamarudin's charisma also helped. Besides being a successful corporate figure, he is also Pasir Puteh Umno division chief.

Kamarudin has been closely associated with the party's top leadership particularly Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar.

Said an Umno leader: "Though Wan Fauzi is a popular figure in Semerak, it is Kamarudin who is close to the top leaders. He is the man who will be able to deliver and the voters are aware of this."

While the BN was cautiously optimistic, Pas was over-confident. Party-insiders say party workers did not take the campaign seriously as they believed that since the State Government is in their hands and Semerak voters were traditionally supportive of those in power, Pas was unshakeable.

They said Pas workers did not take their task seriously, allowing BN workers to make major inroads by going from house to house to garner support.

"There was no serious onslaught on our part," said a Pas official.

Many of the party workers were confident that the mere presence of Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat in Semerak during the campaign was good enough.

They believed the large turnout at Pas ceramah each night indicated the support for the party was still strong.

The people of Kelantan will keep a close watch on the progress of Semerak now that it is under BN to see whether developments take place.

If BN fails to deliver its the promises, Pas will certainly make a big issue out of this.

Certainly, time is not on BN's side as it has less than three years to fulfil the pledges before it faces the next general election.

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