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Barisan Nasional makes amends with sweeping victory

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ITS pride badly bruised by the defeat in Teluk Intan, the Barisan Nasional fought back. It fought like an underdog in the by-elections to fill the State seats of Permatang and Repah and the parliamentary seat of Kuala Selangor.

The May 17 defeat must have rankled especially in a constituency long considered a Barisan Nasional home turf. It even prompted acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim to sally forth to do battle himself.

Many agreed that it happened because the coalition, lulled by a general sense of well-being because of the magnificent record of economic growth of the country, took the voters too much for granted.

Thus, May 17 was a crucial wake-up call.

It was crucial for many reasons among which was the need to ensure that Datuk Abu Hassan Omar, the Selangor Menteri Besar-designate, win in Permatang.

After Teluk Intan no one was about to take chances on safe bets anymore.

As one Barisan Nasional battle-scarred campaigner said:

"The Teluk Intan experience compelled BN to take a damning look in the mirror and be big enough to admit that it hated what it saw: complacency compounded by the oldest mistake in the book ... taking voters for granted!"

This, together with the stern warning on Tuesday by Anwar, who is acting Umno president, resulted in a much better voter turnout in the three by-elections held simultaneously.

More than 60 per cent cast their ballots in Thursday's pollings, compared to the 53.22 per cent in Teluk Intan.

Abu Hassan pulverised Pas' Mohd Maskuri Mardzuki. He won by a thumping 7,780 votes while Datuk Jamaluddin Adnan secured the Kuala Selangor parliamentary seat by thrashing Pas' Alang Ahmad with a whopping majority of 18,342 votes.

Abu Hassan resigned as Member of Parliament for Kuala Selangor and Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister on May 2 after he was chosen by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to replace Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib as Menteri Besar.

He swapped seats with Jamaluddin as under the Selangor constitution, only a State Assemblyman can be appointed as Menteri Besar.

The DAP failed to repeat its so-called Teluk Intan "Richter Six Political Earthquake" in the Repah by-election after its candidate Wong Zee Nyok was trounced by BN's Gan Chin Yap by a majority of 2,191 votes.

"History should not repeat itself," Anwar had said referring to the Teluk Intan by-election in which BN's Dr Chee See Yoke was defeated by DAP's M. Kulasegaran to clinch the parliamentary seat, which was previously a BN stronghold.

Anwar said it was not the case of the opposition being stronger than the BN, but the Teluk Intan constituents were so confident that BN would retain its seat that they did not come out to cast their votes.

Whose fault was that? It was the fault of those who did not work hard enough to ensure that the BN election workers go all out to get all the supporters of the coalition to feel committed enough that they would go out and vote.

That was a fortnight ago and left to lurk in the darkest corridors of the BN's history.

The coalition bounced back quickly. The leader cracked the whip, got all subordinate leaders to consolidate strength, set aside animosity or petty squabbles or even opposing views, analyse thoroughly what went wrong, and quickly provide effective solutions.

And it is ultimately this power-sharing that ensured victories in Kuala Selangor, Permatang and Repah, surely to be referred to as text-book lessons, learnt the hard but effective way.

Moreover, it is obvious that the people of Permatang wanted their own to be the next Menteri Besar of Selangor as most of the 18,329 farmers, fishermen, traders and estate workers came out in his support.

They were from the 15 villages and oil palm estates which made up the Permatang State constituency, where Abu Hassan is no newcomer.

Abu Hassan may be lucky because Jamaluddin, his campaign mate, is his former political secretary.

Both of them admit that they feel very comfortable with each other and thus there have been no clashes about one candidate upstaging another for the two areas who have never seen any opposition Member of Parliament or State Assemblyman since independence.

Abu Hassan and Jamaluddin won with bigger majorities compared to the 1995 general election.

Perhaps, the opposition, both the DAP and Pas, had no real issues to harp on.

In Teluk Intan it resorted to some dirty tricks, like creating a rumour that the BN was confident of winning the seat even without the Chinese votes. It certainly did not go down well with the Chinese voters who formed 45.06 per cent of the 51,500 constituents.

BN leaders and supporters made futile eleventh hour attempts to refute the allegation.

The issue of corrupt leaders making hay while the sun shines was certainly squeezed for every drop of its worth. Corrupt leaders, or those thought to be corrupt, make tantalising fodder, particularly for the disgruntled voter.

It worked in Teluk Intan, to the DAP's delight. But not in Kuala Selangor, Permatang and Repah. The stern action taken by the Government, including the assurance that these handful of people would be removed for their positions of power, has been convincing enough.

Now that the BN has redeemed itself while at the same time realising the need to constantly respond to the rakyat, the DAP, with its political ambition soundly thrashed, is left with the task of looking for a new catchphrase.

But things are just beginning for the BN elected representatives. Instead of resting on their laurels, their victory simply means that they have to work harder to serve the rakyat effectively.

Rhetorics aside, they must now strive to fulfill their election promises that they so confidently made during their campaigns.

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