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Tough, gruelling time ahead for Changkat Jering wakil rakyat

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SATURDAY was a big day for Mat Isa Ismail, 48. He became a wakil rakyat, after winning the Changkat Jering by-election - furiously fought in an environment coloured by the economic "haze".

For starters, Mat Isa will not elicit the incredulous mana? (where?) when he tells people elsewhere he is the Assemblyman for Changkat Jering.

The small Perak town stormed into everybody's consciousness, with the opening of the Ipoh-Changkat Jering stretch of the North-South Expressway in 1988 which makes driving along that part of the country a lot nicer.

Observers acknowledge that Mat Isa must have prepared mentally for the usual surprises that confront a wakil rakyat.

Many say it is a thankless job. Still, they say he will discover his job tough, even gruelling.

First, he is taking over from the popular Pak Su Lan as the late Datuk Mohamad Razlan Abdul Hamid was intimately known there.

It was Razlan's death that led to the by-election which introduced Changkat Jering to who's who in Malaysian politics.

Pas paraded some big names, from the fiery Mohamad Sabu to the stoic Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat.

BN brought Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Wanita Umno leader Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman, Umno Information chief Datuk Dr Yusof Nor, Umno supreme council member and Defence Minister Datuk Syed Hamid Albar, Gerakan and MIC presidents Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik and Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu respectively, and MCA secretary-general Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh.

The nature of campaigning will shape Mat Isa's job. It brought out in the open a list of grievances and dissatisfaction of a more discerning society.

The voters said they were unhappy with some practical problems like flash floods, blocked drains and uncollected rubbish.

Then there were the usual dose of land title problems, which drew an unstinting assurance from Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu (MP for Sungai Siput) that it was being looked into by the Perak Special Land Title Problems Committee.

So combustible the problem was, that a statement by Menteri Besar Tan Sri Ramli Ngah Talib that the special committee was established three months earlier and not with the by-election in mind, was disputed by Pas.

When put together, these practical problems became explosive, and had threatened to derail the BN campaign.

There were talk of a small "rebellion" among BN voters, which observers said was translated into the low turn-out of 57.62 per cent, from 68.2 per cent in 1995.

The majority for BN too dwindled. Mat Isa took the seat with a 3,544-vote majority, down from the 6,402 margin in the last general election.

With all this set to influence his job specification, Mat Isa will draw strength from the fact that he has been in mainstream politics for sometime now.

Mat Isa was formerly private secretary to the Education Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, and a former Umno Youth executive secretary.

"The actual battle for Mat Isa and State BN leaders now lies in how they begin to prescribe the medication to the constituents who were seen to have been unfairly treated," said another observer.

"But he can change things for the better provided the trappings of office do not get the better of him and his hard-core supporters," said one elderly Bukit Gantang resident.

As for the other candidate, Idris Ahmad, the 34-year-old former lecturer, the result was a setback. Pas had high hopes, but by the time the votes were being counted, it had become an anti-climax.

Idris skipped the vote counting. So did his supporters who were somewhat subdued, removing any doubts to backers of BN as to who will win.

Idris and Pas supporters retreated to the party's Air Kuning office, a stone's throw away from the counting centre, Sekolah Menengah Tengku Menteri, Changkat Jering.

Much was at stake. Pas read much into its typically well-attended ceramah, said a campaigner. But of the 10 polling centres, it only took Kampung Cheh, and as it has always been a stronghold, that did not surprise anyone.

In the end, the victory to BN was comfortable.

Observers said the nature of Pas ceramah might have backfired, to some extent.

Nik Abdul Aziz was said to have done BN a small favour when he related how investments were heading to Kelantan after the visit by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to the State earlier this year.

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