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Dissent among party members may have caused Barisan's loss

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ALL that Pas had to show in Perlis before Saturday's Arau parliamentary by-election was a single State seat, won 16 years ago.

Even that was achieved by default when the nomination papers of the Barisan Nasional candidate - Datuk Azmi Khalid - was rejected.

The loss in 1982 of the Bintong State seat then was a major political incident in Perlis, as Azmi (now Deputy Housing and Local Government Minister) was then mentioned as a possible candidate for Menteri Besar.

Political observers said against this background, Saturday's victory for Pas was something else. The Pas victory by 1,323 votes came as a surprise partly because BN had a 6,889-vote majority in 1995.

It is also regarded the "backyard" of Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim - he is Arau Umno divisional chief, former Arau MP, and now State Assemblyman for Tambun Tulang, one of the five State seats in Arau.

"The thinking had been that BN will win but with a reduced majority of about 3,000," said an observer.

To Shahidan, the real surprise was BN's loss in Umno strongholds like his Tambun Tulang constituency.

Arau's other State seats are Sanglang, Pauh, Guar Sanji and Simpang Empat.

Although traditionally, Sanglang and Guar Sanji have had a significance presence of Pas supporters, the rest are considered safe areas for BN.

Pending the outcome of the post-mortem ordered by Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Shahidan has offered other reasons. One is what he described as dissent among local party members.

Observers said this could mean not everyone had been enthusiastic about the candidacy of Ismail Kassim, 38, a younger brother of Shahidan.

To some, the choice of Ismail, came at a time of the emergence of slogans like nepotism and cronyism.

"When the BN announced that Ismail was its choice," conceded the 59-year-old Pas candidate Hashim Jasin, "I knew I was in with a chance."

Pas exploited Ismail's candidacy to the maximum despite the argument that the 38-year old must be judged strictly on his own merits.

In turn, some BN figures launched a personal attack against the well-respected Pas candidate. This was, to some observers, counter-productive.

Even without the burden of nepotism to contend with, Ismail had already sensed trouble, noting that the by-election came in the wake of BN's landslide victory in the 1995 general election.

Bagan was returned to the DAP just after the general election. In May last year, the DAP wrested Teluk Intan for the first time in history in what secretary-general Lim Kit Siang described as a "Richter six political earthquake."

Umno also acknowledged that Pas had been working harder in wooing voters compared with its own by-election machinery.

Party members who prefer to remain anonymous agree. They point out that some Umno men were more interested in putting a grand show to welcome and entertain outstation Umno leaders rather than canvassing for voter support.

"Perhaps losing had never crossed their mind," one of them remarked.

In the meantime, Pas only had to step up its machinery which had been working systematically for the past several months in anticipation of the

general election.

Pas was banking on public sympathy in Perlis to give Opposition parties the chance to play the check-and-balance role.

What party workers were telling voters was that Pas should be allowed to show what it could do for them at least between now and the next general election.

Development would continue in Arau even if the MP is from Pas as it is fully represented by the BN at the State-level, they argued.

Besides harping on nepotism, crony-capitalism and the impact of current economic downturn on ordinary people, Pas also paid extra attention on local issues to influence voters.

"National issues were secondary," Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor eventually declared.

The effectiveness was apparent as the by-election approached that Hashim confidently said many local fence-sitters and traditional Umno sympathisers have begun voicing their support for the party.

"There's a considerable number of disillusioned constituents out there who want to make known their message," he added.

Among local issues raised were the levy imposed on fruits collected by farmers in traditional dusun located in the State's permanent forest reserves.

The orchards came into being decades ago and have since been gazetted as permanent forest reserves. The Government imposed the levy following the change in land status.

Some 700 small-scale farmers had objected to the levy. They claimed to have been charged for the annual permit to enter the forest to collect the fruits.

The Government had said it would consider combining the levy and annual permit charge so that the farmers could pay in one lump sum.

Pas also scored on land acquisition for the Kuala Perlis-Changloon highway project and affected residents' dissatisfaction over inadequate compensation.

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