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Pendulum swings other way in Arau

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AMID all the commentaries and analyses on the Arau parliamentary by-election a remark by Hashim Jasin helps to illuminate things: "When the Barisan Nasional announced that Ismail Kassim was its choice I knew I was in with a chance."

In the event the 59-year-old Pas candidate won by 1,323 votes. Gaining 12,864 votes he defeated Ismail, 38, a younger brother of the Perlis Menteri Besar, Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim.

In the 1995 general election the late Kamaruddin Ahmad from Barisan won 16,226 votes defeating Mohamad Zain Hamzah from Semangat 46 by a majority of 6,889 votes.

The remark by Hashim explained his party's strategy during the hustings. Published on page one of Harakah, the party newspaper on the eve of polling was a story with the headline "Rakyat favouring nepotism if they vote the BN candidate".

On the inside page was a commentary by party spokesman Subky Latiff which began thus: "Barely weeks after the Umno general assembly had debated issues on nepotism and cronyism among Umno leaders, and just over a month after Southeast Asia had criticised the practice of cronyism in politics and the economy by Suharto and his family members in Indonesia, this negative trend has emerged in Arau".

The commentary was provocatively titled "Suharto visits Arau".

And so for the first time Pas has won a parliamentary constituency in Perlis and as a consequence a post-mortem is being conducted by Perlis Umno. Already noted was Shahidan's reaction expressing surprise that Barisan had lost in areas considered Umno strongholds, including Tambun Tulang which he represents as State Assemblyman.

Arau's four other State seats are Sanglang, Pauh, Guar Sanji and Simpang Empat. Shahidan noted that only Pauh gave solid backing to Barisan.

After nomination day Shahidan had explained that the choice of Ismail as the Barisan candidate was the unanimous decision of State Umno leaders. Question: Given that he is Menteri Besar, State Umno chairman, State Barisan chairman, Arau Umno chief and State Assemblyman could others have voted against him?

Question two: did not the Umno leaders take note of party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's statement in the Umno general assembly that his son was once proposed as a candidate in a general election but he had disallowed it to avoid charges of nepotism.

Could it be said that in a contest for nominations and all other things being equal, being the son or brother of a party leader becomes a handicap. Party members themselves would be aware that they'd be doing their leaders a disservice by indulging in nepotistic practices.

Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor himself had described the choice of the Menteri Besar's brother as not only a mistake but also insensitive. Quote: "Umno had during its general assembly discussed and argued extensively on nepotism. Even before the dust on that could settle, Umno decided on the Menteri Besar's brother as its candidate."

Mentioned in several newspapers as one reason for the Barisan defeat was dissent among Umno members.

Umno secretary-general Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik was pointedly asked by reporters if accusations of nepotism had influenced the voters. He replied that he did not know for certain but that it would be looked into.

Puzzling for him was why Umno had lost some 8,000 votes after having won the constituency by a majority of nearly 7,000 votes. "That's a big loss of voters," he added.

Meriting attention would be the analyses in Malay newspapers such as Utusan Malaysia. It described the Pas victory as advance warning of greater challenges for Barisan in the next general election.

Pas has now shattered Barisan's impregnable wall in Perlis, it said, and will henceforth try to capture other areas. It rejected Shahidan's view that Pas had won because of its aggressive tactics, causing fear among voters. It noted the Menteri Besar had never been tested since the 1995 elections.

As chairman of the State Barisan and Perlis Umno he would have to bear responsibility for the failure to retain the constituency.

Remedial measures would have to be taken to avoid a similar defeat. "After this the Menteri Besar must devote attention to the constituency even though it has fallen into Pas' embrace. Do not treat it as a stepson just because it has fallen to the opposition..."

Meanwhile Berita Harian in its analysis advised State leaders to draw the necessary lessons from the defeat. The voters had made their choice in conformity with the democratic system but "this does not mean that the State Barisan should blame the opposition without identifying its own mistakes".

Posed also was the question whether Pas could not deliver the promises it had made to the voters.

DAP leader Lim Kit Siang has described the Barisan defeat in Arau as a "Richter five political earthquake". His own party had wrested the Teluk Intan parliamentary constituency in May last year and Bagan before that. Could all of these have impelled him to launch Tanjong Four, and given Pas the stimulus to expand its influence in such States as Terengganu and Kedah also.

To be remembered though is that in 1964, Pas won the Perlis State constituency of Utan Aji but it was recaptured by Umno and has remained the latter's stronghold since.

Victory or defeat in politics does not engender humility.

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