

01/12/1999

A sobering victory for the BN

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THE resounding victory of the Barisan Nasional in the 10th general election amidst claims by the opposition that they stood the best chance of defeating the ruling coalition has an addendum to it.

It has to be mindful of the drastic reduction in its popular votes and the inroads made by the opposition in the States.

Although it convincingly beat off the opposition onslaught, its much reduced popular votes can spell trouble if no improvements take place between now and the next election four to five years down the road.

BN won 148 seats against Pas which took 27, the Democratic Action Party 10, Parti Keadilan Nasional five and Parti Bersatu Sabah three. In the 1995 general election the BN won 162 seats.

The loss of Terengganu for the first time, the failure to recapture Kelantan and the setback in Kedah were the dampeners. This could not have been due solely to the strength of the opposition.

It had as much to do with the weaknesses of the BN leadership in these Malay heartland States - something that Umno must have the courage to acknowledge.

The signs of weakness which emerged in the 1995 general election, when many seats in these States were won with narrow margins, had not been sufficiently recognised and addressed.

Whether it was the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, or the Kedah Menteri Besar, Tan Sri Sanusi Junid, who said that there was no excuse for the BN, in particular Umno, to do so badly in the State, the fact remains that Kedah is today in the same precarious position as Terengganu was after the 1990 general election.

Unless something drastic is done to remedy the situation, Pas will be stalking the State the way a predator would of a wounded prey.

Pas, on the other hand, had successfully used the breathing space, and probably better funding, afforded by its collaboration with the DAP, Keadilan and PRM to its advantage. The losers were the DAP and Keadilan.

The one-to-one contest with the BN in Malay majority areas saw Pas reaping the full benefit of the emerging dichotomy in the Malay community. With no spoilers to take away Malay votes, the stage was set for an all-out battle between the BN and Pas.

There is nothing to suggest that the split in the Malay votes between the BN and Pas will not worsen.

The BN, in particular Umno, cannot take this lightly. There is the likelihood that Pas may moderate its stand on core issues as a strategy to attract more middle-of-the-road Malays to its side and to facilitate greater collaboration with the non-Malays and non-Muslims.

Except for Kelantan and Terengganu, where Islam and the Malay issues will continue to dominate, Pas leadership elsewhere may adopt a more moderate stance and may even become more urbane in order to appeal to a wider section of the multi-racial society.

With a rich State like Terengganu under its command, Pas will be able to generate funds to extend the fight to other fronts, starting logically with the weakest BN States.

The changing demography is another significant point that Umno may want to consider in the preparation of any strategy to face Pas. The free movement of labour and the urbanisation of the Malays as a direct consequence of BN's development policies have opened new opportunities for

Pas.

Pas is now able to spread its wings more successfully to areas hitherto inaccessible to it such as the new urban centres, the university towns and land schemes.

As much as Umno is no longer a Malay political party, having opened its membership to other ethnic groups, Pas is no longer a rural Malay party. It has followed Umno's footsteps to the cities, corporate suites - with the help of Keadilan - and the urban slums.

Its successful attack on Kedah and forays into Perak, Selangor and Pahang suggest this trend. In addition to Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah, it now has representatives in the State assemblies of Penang, Perak, Pahang and Selangor.

Umno has to live up to this challenge in order to maintain its leadership of the Malays and halt Pas' advance. The future Umno will be facing a very different Pas.

To be able to fight back this "green tide" and to handle other complicated issues, Umno headquarters must be equipped with the best research and policy-making unit that it once had. Its administration too can benefit from improvement.

The opposition front may not survive, at least not in its present form. The DAP will leave as a matter of necessity or it will die. The non-Malays, especially the Chinese, rejected the opposition's electoral pact and sent no uncertain signals to the DAP.

Still the decimation of the DAP's top brass in Penang was wholly unexpected.

The humiliating defeat of its secretary-general Lim Kit Siang and deputy chairman Karpal Singh was a clear signal that the Chinese do not cherish the co-operation between the DAP and Pas.

But in the case of Penang, the elimination of the DAP's duo was also due to the strength of the BN.

The Chief Minister, Tan Sri Koh Tsu Koon, is an exemplary leader and has been able to get the co-operation of all BN parties in the State.

Despite the hype and its seemingly well-funded and well-oiled election machinery, Keadilan failed to measure up.

It fared worse than Parti Melayu Semangat 46 when the latter first contested the general election in 1990. Keadilan won only five out of 59 parliamentary seats it contested. S46 did better by winning eight in 1990 and six in 1995.

Keadilan fared no better at the State level. Out of 67 candidates it fielded only four won.

With this unimpressive performance, there is nothing to guarantee that Pas will treat Keadilan any better than it did the now defunct S46.

Pas does not cherish having another Malay-dominated party vying for Malay votes.

Another loser is PBS. The Sabah-based opposition party won only three parliamentary seats of the 16 it contested, a major drop from the eight that it won in the 1995 election.

One sobering reminder to Umno and the Malays is the fact that the party, although still the dominant partner of the BN, is weaker than it was in the last Parliament.

Its partners, on the other hand, are stronger by comparison. But given the long established tradition in the BN, the setback is not likely to affect, to any discernible degree, Umno's ability to lead.

The non-Malay parties of the BN are more likely to use their stronger position to ensure stability rather than to make demands.

The same applies to BN parties in Sabah and Sarawak which contributed brilliantly to the victory.