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Continued backing for Barisan Nasional policies (HL)

Joceline Tan

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - The Barisan Nasional's decisive election victory reflects the rakyat's continued backing for its policies but its setback in pockets of the Malay heartland is cause for some concern.

Its electoral reverses, especially, to Pas is seen by some as an indication of the Malay disenchantment with some aspects of the BN, or more specifically, with Umno.

The BN was returned to power with a comfortable two-thirds majority, winning 148 of the 193 parliamentary seats but failed to regain Kelantan and lost Terengganu to Pas.

The BN also retained emphatic two-thirds majorities in nine State Legislative Assemblies whereas Pas, the leading partner of the opposition front, collected all but two of the State constituencies in Kelantan.

In Terengganu, Pas won 28 of the 32 State seats, leaving the BN with only four.

The lion share of the 42 parliamentary seats collected by the front also went to Pas which won 27 seats.

The front's other three partners, DAP, Parti Keadilan Nasional and PRM, fared less well although they bagged a total 41 per cent of the popular vote compared to the BN's 56 per cent.

DAP picked up 10 parliamentary seats and Keadilan five. PRM returned home empty-handed.

"It is a great victory for BN. It shows general support for the BN's policies," said think-tank head Razak Baginda.

"But like it or not, it's also a great defeat for Umno," he added.

Umno, he said, would have to react fast because it was clear that the non-Malay vote had carried the day for the BN.

Razak has suggested that Umno commissions an independent study to do a frank and critical "reality check" on its performance, make recommendations and table them at the next Umno General Assembly.

Umno veteran and former Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Musa Hitam said the nature of the BN victory should spur Umno on to an indepth post-mortem of the "why, where and how we went wrong."

"We must ask ourselves why less Malays are supporting Umno than before," he said.

Last night at the BN victory Press conference at the Putra World Trade Centre, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had mentioned that a thorough examination would be conducted.

DAP and PRM would also have to do some soul-searching of their own.

Newly-elected Kota Melaka MP Kerk Kim Hock described the DAP performance as "another disastrous defeat."

DAP saw stunning losses of top leaders including secretary-general Lim Kit Siang, chairman Dr Chen Man Hin and deputy chairman Karpal Singh although it performed marginally better in terms of seats, winning 10 parliamentary and 11 State seats.

Keadilan which had started out with high hopes but, apart from president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail's clearcut win in Permatang Pauh, its other key figures lost. They included deputy president Dr Chandra Muzaffar, Youth chief Mohd Ezam Mohd Noor, vice-president Tian Chua and committee member Zainur Zakaria.

The opposition front's spotty successes also raises questions about where they go from here as an opposition coalition.

Keadilan's dismal show had led some to jump to the conclusion that they are merely a party bouyed by sympathy and riding on the coat-tails of Pas.

"But there were a lot of close calls considering they are greenhorns. I think they represent the middle class Malays who are unhappy with what's going on," said Musa.

Some think the Malay vote swing is more a case of protest votes than pro-Pas votes, especially the swing in the Klang Valley.

The swing is of some concern to the non-Malays who worry that Umno will now try to become more Islamic in all the wrong ways just to win support away from Pas.

Umno, says a Chinese cultural figure, will now have to tread a fine line in re-establishing its Malay credentials without alienating the non-Malay support.

The fact that this election took place without any untoward incident despite the intensity of campaigning is a credit to the maturity of Malaysian voters.

At the same time, this is an election where voters obviously thought long and hard about issues and what they wanted of their leaders and made their choice through the ballot.