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Malaysians keep faith in Barisan to lead country

Zulkifli Othman

MALAYSIANS have kept faith with Barisan Nasional to lead the country into the new millennium, even as the opposition coalition celebrates the psychological dent it caused to the ruling party's hold on power.

The gains made by the hastily put-together Barisan Alternatif was however hardly broad-based or even. Pas had a good outing, DAP a dismal one, Keadilan did not get the wide support it expected and Parti Rakyat Malaysia was a no-show.

Pas delivered the seats and emerged with more parliamentary seats and two state governments, while DAP lost its heavyweights Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh.

Pas declared a public holiday in Terengganu to celebrate its win, underscoring its new position in the driving seat of an opposition front. Presenting an unprecedented united opposition that ensured most contests were one-on-one fights with Barisan Nasional, the opposition front's uneven performance would likely alter the dynamics of any future cooperation.

Banded together with little in common except their opposition to the 18-year rule of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, DAP, Pas, Keadilan and PRM had counted on the support of young voters whose passions were stoked by the issue of the sacking of former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Pas' win in Terengganu means that it will speak with the weight of an additional state government in any talks with its partners.

In contrast, DAP and Keadilan will bring at best mixed results to the post-election negotiating table. DAP secretary general Lim lost both the Bukit Bendera parliamentary and the Kebun Bunga state seats in Penang and Karpal Singh lost in Jelutong and Datuk Keramat.

The biggest win for Keadilan is that of its president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Ismail who defeated former deputy transport minister Datuk Ibrahim Saad in Permatang Pauh, a seat held by her husband Anwar for 16 years. Wan Azizah's victory proved isolated, however. With the exception of Azmin Ali who won the Hulu Kelang state seat, Keadilan made almost no headway. The party's one-dimensional rallying cry centred on the fate of Anwar demonstrated that street passions do not translate into election results and the party may well travel the same road as the now defunct Parti Melayu Semangat 46.

Kelantan's voters are still behind Pas, voting in the fundamentalist party's candidates in all parliamentary seats won by its one-time partner Parti Semangat 46 in the previous general elections, with the exception of Gua Musang which was successfully defended by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. Keadilan's reliance on feelings raised by the sacking of Anwar to win votes backfired and served only to split the Malay votes to the advantage of Pas.

Pas had placed the issue of a totalitarian Islamic state in the backburner in this election, while DAP has studiously pretended that the issue was not important.

However, Pas' mandate to extend its Kelantan experiment of an Islamic fundamentalist Government to Terengganu puts the spotlight back on its avowed aim to create its own brand of Islamic state and how that would sit with its Barisan Alternatif partners. Lim had said that DAP's true stand on the Islamic state plan would only be revealed if the opposition wins.

Its strong base in Johor, Sabah and Sarawak providing an unassailable lead, Barisan Nasional returned to power with a two-thirds majority in Parliament intact. But the ruling coalition will have to contend with a more spirited opposition emboldened no doubt now that two state governments are in its camp.

The number of Umno ministers among the casualties, including ministers in the PM Department Datuk Abdul Hamid Othman and Datuk Ibrahim Ali, Second Finance Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed, Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Megat Junid Megat Ayob, Rural Development Minister Datuk Annuar Musa and Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Ibrahim Jusoh was a backlash from a split in Malay votes.

DAP's conspicuous lack of success indicated that non-Malay votes were not swayed by rhetorics and the stability offered by a party that has ruled for four decades remains their choice.

The opposition coalition had claimed it would forever change the face of Malaysian politics by highlighting corruption, abuse of power and the lack of civil liberties, democracy and press freedom.

But judging from its mixed results, Malaysians have voted for stability, peace, harmony and progress that BN has nurtured since the country's Independence.

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