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Abdullah-Umno

UMNO'S APPROACH TO ISLAM WILL BE THE SAME, SAYS DPM

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 1 (Bernama) -- Umno will not embrace Islamic radicalism to recapture Terengganu and Kelantan it lost to PAS in Monday's general election, the Singapore Straits Times quoted Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as saying.

In a report titled "Umno won't go the PAS way" today, it quoted Abdullah, an Umno vice-president who is assuming the duties of deputy president, as saying that "we (Umno) are very moderate people".

"The approach to religion will always be the same. It has not caused upheaval or concern among the non-Muslims.

"Religious extremism, even if it comes from Muslims, we will oppose," he said.

Yesterday, DAP secretary-general Lim Kit Siang was quoted as saying that pressure would be on Umno to compete with PAS on the Islamic terrain following PAS' dramatic inroads into Umno's stronghold in the just-concluded general election.

Lim, who failed to win any seats this time around, said Umno would now be under pressure to push for Islamisation policies.

The Barisan Nasional (BN) won 148 of the 193 parliament seats while PAS increased its parliamentary seats from seven in the 1995 polls to 27 in Monday's election.

Abdullah said the government was pleased with its strong two-thirds mandate.

"We have a strong mandate and there is reason to be happy. We have about 56 per cent of the popular vote," he said.

The deputy prime minister said overall, the message from voters appeared to be that they still wanted the BN "but with some adjustments".

"I think the personality of the candidate has become quite a major issue. People are placing an increasing weightage on the image of the person who is contesting," Abdullah said.

Asked if the voting patterns indicated a serious split in the Malay community, Abdullah said: "I would not say that there is a serious split. Malays also voted for us (Umno).

"But there is a stronger demand by the Muslims and the younger Muslims that more should be done for Islam. We have been misunderstood on the issue of Islam. Our approach has been on improving the lot of Muslims," he said.

Asked on his impression of the opposition challenge, Abdullah said PAS remained the main and strongest opposition party.

"In fact, it was Parti Keadilan Nasional that helped PAS at this election. They kicked up the fuss about reformasi and PAS seized upon it very, very quickly. And it had more to offer than Keadilan. It had Islam," he said.

Abdullah said it was Keadilan which suffered. "Klang Valley is their heartland but BN has been able to maintain its position," he said.

Keadilan only managed to secure five Parliament seats in the general election.

As for PAS, Abdullah said: "PAS today is different from what it was.

"The pondok image is now changed. They have professionals and middle-class in their ranks. We are hoping that with these people, there can be changes in PAS that calls for policies towards Islam that are not radical," he said.

On the DAP, Abdullah said the party had lost the election.

"The Chinese have shown stronger support for the BN," he said.

Asked if the strong Chinese support would give the community greater clout in the BN, Abdullah said: "The agreement between the partners of the coalition will remain. If you are talking about policies, Umno will be very responsive to all coalition members."

To a question that some people had said that the swing of Malay votes was directed against Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Abdullah said: "A criticism against Dr Mahathir is a criticism against us. You cannot separate Dr Mahathir from Umno".

Asked if political succession was on the agenda now, Abdullah said: "That issue has never been raised. As far as Umno is concerned, Umno is strongly behind Dr Mahathir".

Asked if the election results would have any effect on business policy, Abdullah said Malaysians and foreigners should not expect changes in the government's attitude towards business.

"The private sector will continue to be the engine of growth," he added.

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