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Victory reflects changes in voters sentiments

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AS results trickled in last night, factors which tilted the balance for Barisan Nasional quickly became abundantly clear - the ruling party's unprecedented victory in Ranau, one of the 14 Kadazandusun seats, and in Muslim-majority constituencies won by Parti Bersatu Sabah in 1994.

This, coupled with a 100 per cent showing by BN including Umno in all Muslim-majority seats, sealed the victory for the ruling party whose final tally was 31 seats, just one short of the two-thirds majority.

Once this was evident (it surfaced at around 10pm when the score was 20:13 in favour of BN), PBS would have to win all six Chinese majority seats plus several Muslim constituencies and the mixed seats as well.

But this did not happen when BN retained Elopura, one of the Chinese-majority seats where Datuk Tham Nyip Shen (BN-SAPP) improved his majority from 870 to 1,930.

Failing to get all 14 Kadazandusun and Chinese-majority seats meant that PBS must do well in the 27 Muslim-majority seats which are BN strongholds.

When PBS won 25 seats in 1994, it took a few of the Muslim-majority seats, including Klias, through Datuk Lajim Ukin and the neighbouring constituency of Kuala Penyu won by Datuk Wences Anggang.

However, this time, Lajim, now with BN, won with an improved majority of 3,770 against 405 in 1994.

Wences, secretary-general of Parti Demokratik Sabah of Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, emerged as just two of the 12 BN-PDS candidates who won this time, improving his 400-majority to 884.

Observers said Wences' victory and the feat of Datuk Yong Teck Lee (Likas) who retained his seat with a majority of 4,962 in a cast that includes Datuk Harris Salleh of Parti Bersekutu, were pluses for the BN concept.

This was because Wences, a Kadazandusun, and Yong won in Muslim majority constituencies.

With defeats in Kadazandusun seats suffered by PDS' big guns led by Dompok (Moyog) and deputy president Datuk Wilfred Bumburing (Tamparuli) and that of PBRs president Datuk Joseph Kurup, Wences and Datuk Siringan Gubat, the information chief of PDS who won in Ranau, emerge as candidates for the Chief Minister's post to replace Dompok.

This would be the case if a Kadazandusun leader were to become the Chief Minister in the new Government.

"It seems that the people of Penampang did not want a Kadazandusun to be the Chief Minister, which was why they rejected Dompok," said BN chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad last night.

He said the rotation system for the Chief Minister's post would be continued. "But who will lead the Government will be decided later," he said, adding that results must be analysed.

Dr Mahathir noted the Chinese majority in the urban areas did not give strong support to the BN, which was why "my friend Dompok lost".

"I hope they (Dompok and Kurup) will not be disappointed and will continue their struggle for Sabah," he said.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi too expressed disappointment at the defeat of Dompok and Kurup.

"BN must have contingency plans," said political scientist Datuk Mahazir Khir when interviewed by RTM on the question of the Chief Minister's post.

Both Dr Mahathir and Abdullah observed a change in the stance of the Kadazandusun voters.

Dr Mahathir also alluded to the reduced majority of PBS candidates. (Even the majority of PBS president Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan in Tambunan dropped from 5,696 to 4,675).

"Despite BN losing in some Kadazandusun areas, the majority was not as big before. This shows a change in the stand of the Kadazandusuns," Dr Mahathir said.

As it was becoming clear that BN was on course to victory, at a juncture, there was even a rumour that Dr Mahathir, who had made three trips to Sabah between Feb 18 and March 11, would make another dash to Kota Kinabalu.

However, Dr Mahathir who was at a private function, remained in Kuala Lumpur.

The BN's victory also legitimised its mandate in the last five years after the 1994 election when it had the help of 22 crossovers from the PBS.

Here in Kota Kinabalu, the mood at the BN head office in Putatan was upbeat with Abdullah describing the victory as an "endorsement of the BN".

"Dr Mahathir himself was in Sabah a few times and spoke at several places to convince the people to back BN," he said.

Despite the sentiment factor, Abdullah noted the good showing of BN in places with sizeable numbers of Kadazandusun voters. "We are satisfied with the victory of Datuk Osu Sukam (State Umno chief) in an area considered grey," he said.

On the contrary, the mood at Harris' house in Jalan Likas where some supporters had converged was subdued.

Staring a devastating defeat, Harris, still in fighting mood, said: "I say good-luck ... I don't want to have anything to do with Sabah anymore."

Bersekutu fielded candidates in all 48 constituencies and at one stage Harris had boldly predicted that his party would sweep 40 seats despite fielding largely political neophytes.

BN strategists had quietly been predicting that the average vote-count for Bersekutu in a constituency would be limited to 500-600.

The outcome did not veer too much from this forecast. For instance, the number of votes secured by Bersekutu was 463 in Tandek, Banggi (454), Sindumin (934), Klias (640) and Petagas (960).

Only Harris who garnered 3,576 votes and Lidu @ Serirama Johari (Kadamaian) who secured 2,725 votes were among those with respectable scores.

Analysts were last night also dissecting PBS' continued dominance in the Kadazandusun seats where it defeated most of its Assemblymen who crossed over to the BN.

Said Wilfred Tangau, a close aide of Dompok: "Sentiments had overwhelmed the need for development."

Yet, only a detailed analysis of the results will tell exactly how the Kadazandusuns had voted this time.

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