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Election-Mokhtar (News Analysis)

WAN MOKHTAR A CAUSE OF BN DOWNFALL IN TERENGGANU?

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 30 (Bernama) -- One of the Menteri Besar tipped to be dropped from the Barisan Nasional's list of candidates for the just-ended general election was Terengganu's Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad.

If not for anything else, he has been at the helm of the government of the oil-rich state for over 25 years, longer than anybody else has ever held the position in the country's history.

Talk about the BN changing several state chief executives gathered momentum following word from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that the BN would introduce about 30 per cent new faces in its line-up for the polls.

But to the surprise and even disappointment of many, especially among Umno politicians in Terengganu itself and those who aspire to be the MB one day, Wan Mokhtar was retained.

A veteran Terengganu Umno politician told Bernama before the candidates' list was announced that Umno politics in the state had reached what he called a "stalemate".

The politician, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Umno members in the state was feeling a sense of "immobility" because Wan Mokhtar's "refusal to make way".

"Wan Mokhtar is definitely a factor in this election. Pas is also making it an issue and it would be difficult for anyone to defend his position or justify his longevity on the job," he said.

Following this, Bernama interviewed Wan Mokhtar in his office in Kuala Terengganu shortly before the dissolution of parliament on Nov 11. He was, among other things, asked whether he would this time make way and if he thought he was indispensable.

He appeared upset by the question, but offered what sounded like a standard answer -- "I'll stay as long as the party (referring to Umno) leadership wants to. No I'm not indispensable".

But would this not mean that he was blocking the chances of other Terengganu politicians going up the ladder, he was asked.

"No, I am have groomed others to take over and it is up to them to prove themselves", he said.

According to the politician, Wan Mokhtar, an Islamic studies graduate of Egypt's famous Al-Azhar University, appeared to portray that he was "indispensable" in order to counter the strong influence of Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Pas) in the state, led by its formidable deputy president Abdul Hadi Awang.

In other words, the impression given was that without his presence, Pas could easily make inroad into Umno strongholds in the state in the election, given the notion that the party has long been relishing to take over power.

"I fear that if Wan Mokhtar refuses to go, the people of Terengganu would decide for him during the election," said the politician, who claimed then that all Umno-held state constituencies in Terengganu were no longer safe but "grey" and even "black" areas.

This politician's worst fears were confirmed early this morning when Pas in a stunning fashion, swept to power in Terengganu, controlled by the BN through Umno for about 35 years. Before that Pas was in power for one term since 1959. few years.

The Pas' victory was so massive that it had gone beyond all reasonable

expectations. It was nothing short a mass exodus of voters from the BN to Pas.

The party won 28 of the 32 state Legislative Assembly seats from only seven previously. It also left the BN without a single seat in parliament from the state when it took seven for itself with the other seat won by Parti Keadilan Nasional.

Previously, the BN had seven parliamentary seats with Abdul Hadi being the sole Pas MP from the state.

Given the writing on the wall and the silent "resistance" his refusal to make way, many might not be amused when Wan Mokhtar himself expressed shock and disbelief at the way the BN was virtually wiped out at the polls in the state.

" We did not know the reasons for this defeat, but I accept this with patience for it is the verdict of the people," he told reporters early this morning in Chukai after conceding defeat.

" I don't know the factors for this defeat because the BN is confident of what it is doing" he said.

Wan Mokhtar's own crushing defeat in the Chukai state constituency that he has dominated for one generation, and with it the downfall of the BN state government, is perhaps a wake-up call to the party leadership to be more sensitive to the voice of the grassroots, especially when it comes to the choice of candidates in a general election.

Granted that the people of Terengganu might already have made their choice with or without Wan Mokhtar leading the BN in facing the election, still the fact remains he has been in power far too long and the people want a change, said the Terengganu politician.

" Politicians must know when to call it a day. Do not create a delusion of indispensability especially in politics," he added.

Wan Mokhtar's downfall certainly marks the end of an era.

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