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BN's sterling performance

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FUELLED by several factors, including the economic slowdown and the so-called Opposition alliance, the 10th general election held on Nov 29 last year was one full of suspense.

The BN's sterling performance at the polls in 1995 was due to the ruling coalition's proven track record which in part led to an unprecedented period of economic growth for the nation.

But when the Thai baht 'crashed' in mid-1997 precipitating the contagion effect of capital flight from markets throughout the region, the resulting 'Asian economic crisis' affected Malaysia in more ways than some had anticipated.

Malaysia's experience with the economic downturn saw political aftershocks. The banding together of established Opposition parties such as Pas and DAP with the smaller Parti Rakyat Malaysia and the fledgling Parti Keadilan Nasional resulted in the self-styled and loose grouping known as Barisan Alternatif.

Were they capable of taking on, or at least make inroads, into some, if not all the targeted constituencies?

On Nov 12, the wait was finally over. Soon after the dissolution of parliament, Election Commission chairman Datuk Omar Mohd Hashim announced that Malaysia's 10th general election would be held in a single day, on Nov 29.

A hectic nine-day campaign period ensued. While the BN emphasised its continued stability and its proven ability to pull the country's economy out of recession ahead of some other crisis-affected regional economies, the Opposition capitalised, among others, on some voters' anxieties by alleging a litany of sins, both past and present, committed by the Government and some of its leaders.

By the time the final results rolled in during the early hours of Nov 30, it was clear that the people were still with the BN, which was returned to Government with an over two-thirds majority, posting a tally of 141 seats with 44 seats going to the Opposition.

However, the Opposition did achieve some victories. Terengganu fell to Pas, which also maintained its hold on Kelantan.

Furthermore, the percentage of Malay voter support for the BN in some constituencies had lessened considerably.

Nevertheless, BN delivered sparkling performances in some other State assemblies such as in Johor, Sarawak and Negri Sembilan. BN component parties such as those from Sarawak and the MCA also did well, wiping out the Opposition in many of the constituencies they contested.

Concerns regarding the less than brilliant performance by Umno in the polls carried through to the party elections, held over three days from May 11 to 13.

Questions regarding the required make-up of the party's leadership and office-bearers dominated discussions among the party's 2.7 million members in 165 divisions nationwide.

But looking at the eventual results from the voting delegates, it was clear that the grassroots had opted for a delicate balance between continuity and the injection of fresh blood.

Dr Mahathir retained his presidency of Umno unopposed, and acting deputy president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi also assumed the party's number two spot unchallenged.

With both positions secure, it was the contest for the three vice-presidencies which grabbed the spotlight.

The eventual victors were Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Tun Razak, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

Attention then turned once again to the victory of Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz for the party's Wanita Umno wing. Rafidah won by a slim majority over incumbent Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman, reversing her equally narrow defeat to Siti Zaharah in the previous party election.

The anticipation was by no means over. With a Chief Minister and two Menteri Besar losing in the vice-presidential contest - Sabah's Datuk Seri Osu Sukam, Johor's Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman and Negri Sembilan's Tan Sri Mohd Isa Abdul Samad - expectations centred on whether Dr Mahathir would appoint some, if not all of them into the supreme council. The president is empowered by the party constitution to appoint another 10 members into the party's 25-member supreme council.

It was also interesting to note the victories of some candidates who were seen as unconventional, like Johor Baru division chief Datuk Shahrir Samad, a veteran in the political arena.

Furthermore, no women candidates won a supreme council seat, prompting suggestions and requests that Dr Mahathir appoint several women to sit in the council.

Three women were subsequently appointed into the council by the party president at the end of June. They were Siti Zaharah, Wanita Exco member Dr Norraesah Mohamad and lawyer Azalina Othman Said.

The year in passing since Malaysia last celebrated the anniversary of her independence saw not only the country's main democratic process - the general election - being held, but also witnessed two State Assembly by-elections, in Sanggang, Pahang, and Teluk Kemang, Negri Sembilan.

Both by-elections were called resulting from the deaths of its Assemblymen. And while the BN subsequently went on to win both seats, there were several interesting observations arising from the results.

The two-cornered fight between BN and Pas in the Sanggang by-election on April 1 saw the dogged persistence of the whole BN election campaign machinery, which worked around-the-clock to ensure victory.

With the Opposition proclaiming that it was on an irreversible path in making inroads and further eroding voter support for the Government, the BN campaigned by leaving nothing to chance.

The effort paid off. BN candidate Redzwan Harun secured 6,743 votes, defeating Datuk Hishamuddin Yahaya of Pas by a majority of 1,963 votes.

Following from this victory the BN once again secured a win in the Teluk Kemang by-election on June 10 when its candidate S. Sothinathan won with a majority of 5,972 votes, defeating Parti Keadilan Nasional's Ruslan Kasim who secured 18,528 votes.

The BN's majority was however reduced compared to the previous general election last year when BN's S.A. Anpalagan won with a 9,942 vote majority.

Notable was how the Opposition managed to secure more postal votes than BN. Keadilan polled 1,743 in postal votes compared to BN's 1,625.

The past one year also saw several major Opposition parties conducting their yearly meetings amidst speculation that the Barisan Alternatif was suffering serious setbacks following internal problems facing Keadilan.

Talk of alleged misunderstandings between Keadilan vice-president Marina Yusoff and some members of the party's top leadership began to surface. Marina subsequently resigned as vice-president.

At the same time, calls and suggestions were made that Keadilan merge with PRM, ahead of a possible future merger of all opposition parties involving the formalisation of Barisan Alternatif into a unified entity

with a common name and logo.

The resignation of Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar on Aug 10 drew wide public attention. He was replaced by unheralded Sungai Panjang State Assemblyman Dr Mohd Khir Toyo, who at 35 became the youngest to helm the State.

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