

13/05/2000

Johor candidates' poor showing not seen as a loss

WHEN this year's Johor Umno convention, planned for April 29, had to be postponed until after the party general assembly, a grass roots leader quipped that this might suit the convention organisers just fine.

This would allow the gathering to be turned into a celebration of sorts, he said, "to give our candidates a heroes' welcome".

The general feeling then was one oozing with confidence in anticipation of a good showing by Johor candidates in the party polls.

The timing was right, just months after the Umno-led Barisan Nasional swept clean all 20 parliamentary and 40 State seats in Johor in the November general election.

In fact, Johor has always been described as an Umno fortress, and a party heartland and birthplace.

So, with the 100 per cent achievement in the general election, Johor Umno was looking forward to getting some respect from delegates at the general assembly.

Expectations were high that this would translate into strong representation in the party's second echelon leadership.

Thus, many Johor Umno members were surprised, some even stunned, when eventually only one made it to the supreme council.

Worse, Menteri Besar and State Umno chief Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman failed to make the cut in the vice-presidential race.

"I think we have been badly treated by the delegates," grumbled a general assembly observer from Batu Pahat.

But on reflection, says Deputy Human Resources Minister and Mersing Umno division chief Dr Latiff Ahmad, there were States which fared worse.

"Last time, people said if we had three from Johor (vying for the vice-president's post), all would lose. Now we are represented and that's what matters.

"That's the beauty of Umno. We don't win all but we don't lose all either."

Though defeated, Ghani agrees that all is not lost. He has been quoted as saying that Johor had achieved its objective of being represented at the higher party hierarchy.

Johor will be represented by Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who is Pagoh Umno division chief, in the vice-presidency after both Ghani, and Foreign Minister and Kota Tinggi division head Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar lost in their bid.

Meanwhile, former minister Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad made a return to the supreme council after a lapse of about 10 years.

Let's not forget Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, the Tenggara Umno division head, who won the Youth head's post unopposed.

And just because Johor Umno has delivered in many general elections, it does not automatically mean it can lay claim to the leadership at the national level.

"We have to discard the state sentiments," says Johor Baru Youth head Abdul Latif Endut.

"Notwithstanding their respect for Johor, the delegates here are choosing the leadership of the party. Leaders who can work and deliver."

In other words, the delegates have their own set of criteria for choosing national leaders. Which somehow some Johor candidates have not fully met yet.

Abdul Latif added: "We were wrong to think that those with position (in government) would be in with a better chance to win."

The question thus is whether Johor Umno should work to suit the aspirations of the delegates.

Abdul Latif replies with an overwhelming no. "To the aspirations of the party, yes. As party president (Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) says 'Go back to the basics'. Hopefully one day the delegates will see the wisdom in this."

When delivering his presidential address on Thursday, Dr Mahathir called on members to go back to the basics and practise self-discipline to redeem the party in the eyes of the people.

"Malays who desire continued progress to build a brighter future; who wish to redeem and maintain their dignity must be disciplined, control their desires, and be willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the future of their race, religion and nation," he said.

Returning to Johor Umno, another reason why some State leaders have not been chosen is said to be the lack of exposure.

Says Pulai Umno Youth division committee member Dr Mohd Azam Rauzan: "If you look at the candidates who won, they are known by the people country-wide.

"The no-campaigning rule in the run-up to party elections made it tougher for some Johor candidates."

This lack of national-level exposure may mean that these candidates do not enjoy the appropriate image and reputation outside their State.

There are other reasons why Johor Umno did not fare better in the party elections. The coming Johor Umno convention will be an appropriate venue to deliberate on the matter.

In the meantime, trust the words of a 62-year-old party member from Sri Gading who has attended the general assemblies as a delegate as well as an observer for nearly four decades, for his assessment on Johor Umno.

"We are not united," Hamid Badul pointed out bluntly. "The fact that three from Johor contested the VP's post speaks volumes. Outsiders see this as a weakness of ours."

(END)