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Taib proves them wrong

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ONE man who has fortified his place in Sarawak power politics more than any other is Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, 62, now serving his fifth term as Chief Minister of Malaysia's largest state.

By leading the Sarawak Barisan Nasional (BN) to a landslide victory in the Sept 27 state elections, Taib has proven most political analysts wrong in their predictions.

Winning 60 of the 62 seats in the State Legislative Assembly is no mean feat. The tables were turned on Parti Keadilan Nasional, PAS, DAP, Sarawak Reform Party (STAR) and former Defence Minister and former Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) deputy president Datuk Abang Abu Bakar's Independents Network.

What surprised many was the size of the BN victory - it secured 71 per cent of the popular vote against the DAP's eight per cent, Keadilan's seven per cent, STAR's two per cent, PAS' 0.5 per cent and Independents' 11 per cent.

How did Taib and his BN colleagues do it? Why did the combined Opposition and the large number of Independents, many of them rather well-financed, fail to perform?

Perhaps it is necessary to look at the history of the four or rather three component parties of the present Sarawak BN. Except for the Dayak-based Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS), a breakaway faction of the multiracial Sarawak National Party (SNAP), the other three component parties - PBB, the Chinese-based Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) and SNAP - have all been closely linked to the Sarawak people's early struggle for independence, before and after the formation of Malaysia in 1963.

Middle-aged Sarawakians, who constitute a large percentage of Sarawak's 870,000 voters, are all familiar with these parties, their leaders and their role in local politics.

On the other hand, the Peninsular Malaysia-based opposition parties like Keadilan and PAS are newcomers. Many Sarawakians are still not familiar with them, their leaders, or their style of politicking. The campaigning style of Sarawak BN parties is generally seen as 'milder' compared with the 'aggressive' style of Keadilan, PAS and DAP with their fiery rhetorics.

The only exception is perhaps the so-called Sarawak-based mosquito party STAR which, despite the obvious odds, performed the most credible among the opposition camp judging by the votes two of their candidates secured in Bidayuh-based constituencies. STAR leader Dr Patau Rubis, a former SNAP senior vice-president and sacked assistant minister, obtained 4,608 votes against the BN's Dr Jerip Susil's 8,627 in a straight fight. Apparently he got more votes from the Bidayuh who make up 65.2 per cent of the electorate.

In the neighbouring Bidayuh majority seat of Tasik Biru, Joseph Jindy polled 4,494 votes against the BN's Peter Nansian's 7,238 in another straight fight. Again, a high percentage of Bidayuh votes went to STAR.

Many believe STAR is not a party that can be written off. Its future, according to most observers, depends on whether its present leaders can carry on with their struggle.

Except for two, all Independents, including the 42 contesting as Abang Abu Bakar's group, fared badly. Independent Wong anak Judat, a former PBDS branch leader, as expected, toppled the BN/SNAP incumbent in Meluan but

with a surprisingly large majority of 2,158 votes. It was according to observers the result of two things: the growing unpopularity of the incumbent and the resources at the command of the Independent.

Another Independent who came close to winning was Said Mohidin, who lost by only 559 votes in Limbang to the BN's Richard Wong, a SNAP senior vice-president and the businessman son of former state minister and SNAP president Datuk Amar James Wong. He was helped by votes from the Chinese who constitute 15 per cent of the electorate.

Somewhat unexpected was Keadilan's total washout - it not only failed to win a single seat but 11 of its 25 candidates lost their deposits. Its best hope, Datuk Bujang Ulis, a former PBB leader and former deputy federal minister, managed to secure only 2,448 votes against BN incumbent Mohd Naroden Majais' 4,088 in Simunjan. And in Satok, Keadilan Sarawak youth chief Zulrusdi Mohd Hol polled less than 2,000 votes against the BN incumbent, PBB deputy president and State Tourism Minister Datuk Abang Johari Tun Openg, who secured 4,830 votes. Although Abang Johari's majority this time was reduced by almost half, nevertheless it showed that most Malays chose to stand behind the BN, especially PBB.

The relatively easy win of the BN/PBB Malay candidates led Taib to conclude in his victory acceptance speech on the night of Sept 27 that there was no split in the Malay community after all.

PAS brought in some of their top ceramah speakers and made a strong and passionate appeal for unity among Muslims to back its candidates in the three constituencies it was contesting in - Samariang, Beting Maro and Sadong Jaya. BN/PBB Malay candidates had little difficulty defending their seats, and all emerged with large majorities.

PAS' three candidates only polled a total of about 3,000 votes. Party spiritual leader and Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat, who joined the campaigning in Sarawak, described the amount of votes garnered as indicating that PAS was gaining support despite not winning a single seat. It had hoped to win at least one - in Beting Maro - on the basis of the perceived unpopularity of the BN incumbent, assistant minister Bolhassan Di who polled 4,433 votes. PAS' Abang Ahmad Abang Haji Dahlan obtained only 1,399.

In the coastal (Malay/Melanau) and rural (Dayak/Orang Ulu) areas, the BN is synonymous with pembangunan, or development - taken literally to mean new roads, bridges, water supply, electricity, schools, clinics, housing and even telephones, which are important in the lives of the majority of Sarawakians living outside the established urban centres. It means a passport to a better life.

Although land, especially native customary rights (NCR) land, was and still is an issue, it apparently was not strong enough for the Opposition, especially Keadilan, to use it to win over the rural constituents. In the end, the DAP managed to win only one seat (Kidurong) out of the 13 it contested. Even then, its candidate, former DAP member of parliament for Bintulu Chiew Chiu Sing, won by just a whisker against BN/SUPP incumbent Michael Sim.

If the substantial majorities secured by most BN candidates are anything to go by, support for the BN must be increasing, perhaps more than what their leaders had thought possible. Take, for example, Taib's new Balingian constituency where he obtained a huge majority of about 7,391 votes. His nominated candidate Abdul Karim Rahman Hamzah, who stood in his old constituency of Asajaya, not only beat Abang Abu Bakar but also secured a large majority of 3,665 votes.

Keadilan and PAS must be finding out that it has a lot of ground to cover in Sarawak. What Taib did was decide on the most opportune time to call the polls, select quality candidates and new faces, and make sure the

BN was in a position to cover all the bases within the short nine days allocated for campaigning.

Taib, according to most political observers, is now placed in a very good bargaining position 'to negotiate Sarawak's demands' with the Federal Government. For one thing, he can tell Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that since Abang Abu Bakar had campaigned for Umno's entry into Sarawak and the voters had delivered a strong 'no' by backing BN candidates, Umno leaders should now think twice about spreading their wings to Sarawak.

In other words, Taib is well-entrenched in Sarawak's power hierarchy and he commands a new respect and confidence from Dr Mahathir. Also, he may now choose not to listen to any calls for him to step down and make way for new blood.

Thus, one question being asked is, what is going to happen at next year's PBB party elections? Three years ago, Taib named three party leaders as possible candidates to replace him - Datuk Adenan Satem, Abang Johari and Datuk Effendi Norwawi.

Maybe the answer lies in a statement made by one supporter: 'For Taib, he sees many major tasks ahead to transform Sarawak into an industrial economic powerhouse and bring about a better life for all Sarawakians.'

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