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An intense contest, a close result

OTHER than the truly cretinous, no one will dispute the fact that the battle for electoral victory in the Pendang and Anak Bukit by-elections will be tough. For this is not merely a fight between competing personalities and political parties, but one that is also shaped by the complex arithmetic of Malay-Islam politics. Both Barisan Nasional and Pas know it.

Which explains why Pas, in its no-holds-barred campaign, is on the defensive. Vulgarism, sarcasm and jingoism no longer suffice. Even as the dysfunctional vocal cords of Pas leaders such as Kuala Kedah MP Mohamad Sabu work overtime, some of its acolytes feel compelled to resort to dirty tactics.

Neither constituency is a Pas citadel. It would be a serious error to read the late Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor's victory in the 1999 general election as an abandonment of Umno and an embrace of Pas. An electoral success does not necessarily ensure a party's capacity to command widespread loyalty from the citizenry on a sustained basis. The voting trends in Pendang (from its early days as Kota Setar) seem to suggest fluctuations of mood rather than an outright rejection or endorsement of any particular party.

In the 10 general elections from 1959 to 1999, the ruling coalition won six times and Pas four. Apart from the 1974 general election when BN and Pas joined forces and the 1964 general election when the then-Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in his debut as a parliamentarian, won by a comfortable margin in Pendang (then Kota Setar Selatan), the percentage of majorities clinched by either party has never exceeded 10 per cent.

The reality is that both Umno and Pas have strong support in these areas. True, Pas' politics of hate has polarised the voters along religious lines. But as was the case in the past, three factors will decide whether Barisan Nasional or Pas wins: the candidate's personality or standing, issues and local-level affection or disaffection for either party. Pas is trying to broadbase its support by fielding young professionals. But Barisan Nasional did right in fielding its seasoned veterans.

As for the politically fluid voters, they will respond to the issues raised by the parties. In the 1999 general election, Pas rode on a wave of sympathy for Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. It hopes to repeat this stroke of luck, this time through spurious emotionalism and religio-political obscurantism: capitalising on Fadzil's deeds and milching sympathy. No one can blame it. After all, in politics, winning sympathy is often a matter of life or death.

The outcome of the by-elections will be a snapshot of the popular mindset. It may not quite vivisect the political mind of Malaysia but, nonetheless, it is an indicator of whether the issues raised - development, education, the use of English and the hudud - have impaired the authority of the rival parties. The day of reckoning will come. But in the last lap of the race, there is every chance that the head will brush past the heart.