

19/07/2002

Bridging gulfs of mistrust

THE tale of the tape in the Pendang and Anak Bukit by-elections tells a bitter story. The Election Commission decried the "callous and crude" manner in which the campaign was conducted, particularly by supporters of Pas against those of Umno. Electoral contests being the occasionally rough-and-tumble exercises they are, some high-strung antics were only to be expected. But the nature of the invective bandied about, the number and frequency of actual scuffles, the criminal vandalism of private property and the terrorising of individuals, bathed these two polls outings in a bleakly acrimonious light.

The antipathy between Pas and Umno has gone beyond reason, if professed and practising Muslims can be goaded into regarding each other as though they were such mortal enemies as to preclude even the possibility of contending with each others' ideologies and ideas. Instead, the country is having to witness what seems a diabolical battle between Good and Evil, Right and Wrong - as though either party held a monopoly on one or the other.

The voters have returned cautious, edgy verdicts. It would be tempting to regard Pas' slender 508-vote majority for the Anak Bukit State assembly seat as a sympathy vote in memory of the late party president Datuk Seri Fadzil Noor, but such an analysis would imply a gentility that was hardly in evidence on the ground. Still, Umno and the Barisan Nasional can claim some cold comfort in having greatly reduced Pas' majority in that State constituency, while the BN's slender margin of victory for the Pendang Parliamentary seat is cause more for relief than celebration. The message sent by the electorate is not of victory or defeat, but of the divide in the Malay heartland - even though it seems to have narrowed a little.

Umno and its partners in the Barisan Nasional demonstrated an admirable unity of purpose in their effort to regain the two Kedah seats. Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad lent his authority to the campaign, though briefly, while his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi practically camped in Kedah for the duration of the exercise. Vice-presidents Datuk Seri Najib Razak and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib also worked hard and long in boosting the efforts of Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim and other MBs, including host Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain.

It was a concerted effort, no doubt. But it was barely enough. For Umno and the BN, the road to victory in Kedah in the next general election remains long and winding. More needs to be done by Umno Kedah, especially in wooing the young, who on their motorcycles and with their enthusiasm seemed to be the vanguard for Pas in these constituencies. Umno Youth, take note.