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Doing it in style

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PERHAPS the most significant feature of the Oct 12 parliamentary by-election in Gaya, Sabah was not so much the unexpectedly huge victory margin for the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN).

Rather, it was the way the constituency's Kadazandusun community rallied behind the BN, more specifically, behind Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), led by former Chief Minister Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan, now part of the state's nine-party ruling coalition.

This has been referred to as the PBS factor linked to the great respect that the interior community, who make up one-third of Sabah's population of about three million, have for their *huguon siou* or paramount chief. So great is the respect for Pairin that, as one political analyst puts it, the flock would follow the shepherd wherever he goes. That is, more or less, what has happened.

One farmer who voted in the predominantly Kadazandusun polling district of Poring Poring was quoted by local newspapers as saying he voted for the BN now because Pairin asked him to do so. 'We follow our *huguon siou*.'

Naturally, this point was not lost on the state and federal BN leadership. Prime Minister and BN chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad referred to the support for BN and PBS among voters in Sabah when he congratulated the winning candidate Liew Teck Chan, 54, a vice president of Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP).

When he was ushered into the vote tally centre, Maksak Hall, in Likas before the official result was announced, Pairin received a spontaneous applause, indicative of the party's role in helping the BN clinch a big 12,000-vote majority.

The BN candidate polled 15,639 votes out of a total of 21,968 votes cast, a little shy of 45 per cent of the total registered electorate. His nearest rival, civil engineer Hiew King Cheu, 50, of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), only managed 3,716 votes and a third candidate, 50-year-old Christina Liew of Parti Keadilan (Keadilan), obtained only 2,613 votes and lost her RM5,000 deposit in the process.

The results have clearly raised questions about the near oblivion of the two opposition parties in the context of Sabah politics. However, their dismal performance had not been unexpected.

According to political observers, both parties lacked a strong and credible local leadership. They also had weak organisation and suffered from an 'outsider' image, which does not go down well with Sabahans.

Moreover, certain issues brought up by the Opposition were to a certain extent effectively neutralised by the combined strength and resources of the BN. Besides, the opposition parties did not appeal to the Kadazandusun community with the PBS' return to the BN fold.

Gaya's total electorate is 49,427 strong, with Chinese voters forming the biggest block with 19,122 registered voters or 38.69 per cent of the total. But this time, largely because of several localised issues, including the 'exorbitant' car-parking fees, the closure of Kota Kinabalu's most popular thoroughfare, Gaya Street, and town planning matters, only one-third of the Chinese electorate or 6,000 turned out.

Of this, only a little more than half of their votes went to the BN with the rest being split between DAP and Keadilan. In the by-election, it became apparent that for the BN's Chinese candidate to win, he also needed the support of the non-Muslim Bumiputras (mainly Kadazandusun comprising

16,463 voters or 33.3 per cent of total electorate) and Muslim Bumiputras (Malay, Bajau, Bugis, Suluk and Sungai comprising 10,699 voters or 21.64 per cent) as well, if there was a strong opposition challenge.

However, although Keadilan - headed locally by Datin Saidatul Said, the sister of Sabah Umno deputy head and state minister Salleh Said Keruak - did collect quite a lot of votes in Pulau Gaya, it failed to make any significant inroads into the predominantly Muslim Bumiputra areas.

Still, the number of votes that Keadilan got in Pulau Gaya (its illegal immigrants were repatriated back to their home countries and its squatters are being resettled in Telipok outside Kota Kinabalu) was seen as reflecting some of the local unhappiness with the local authorities.

Other than that, BN/Umno managed to preserve their bulwark well, although they suffered from a lower turnout, put at around 60 per cent in most Muslim Bumiputra areas. The feature of Sabah's Muslim Bumiputra community are less homogeneous compared with those of Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia.

It is in the inland areas where turnout was the highest, averaging at least 70 per cent, despite this being only a by-election. Take, for example, Telipok Laut where 334 votes were pooled for the BN, 41 for Keadilan and 31 for DAP. Another is the Kokol polling district. Here, 372 votes went to the BN, 14 for DAP and nine for Keadilan. In Inanam Darat - right in the heart of Kadazandusun country - which forms part of the PBS seat of Inanam, the BN obtained 638 votes while the DAP managed 231 votes and Keadilan 39 votes.

To Dr Mahathir and Pairin, PBS' return has clearly been a correct move. After all, it has helped to strengthen the ruling coalition by bringing the Kadazandusun community closer to the Government. Where both men once had a falling out at one time, after Pairin suddenly pulled PBS out of the BN and went it alone and went on to win the state elections and form an opposition government for nine years, now they are back together again.

Dr Mahathir wants to see greater political stability in Sabah when he finally makes his exit as Prime Minister in October next year. He clearly believes that with PBS back in the BN fold, this can be achieved.

For the peninsular-based Keadilan, the chances of a pact with DAP are not promising and it is trying to garner support from other local opposition parties like Bersekutu. 'It's not going to be easy for either Keadilan or DAP,' according to one seasoned political observer. 'They will find strong bulwarks in the urban, coastal and inland areas now with the nine-member state BN around.'

In the 1994 state elections for the 48-seat State Assembly, PBS polled 215,95 votes or 49.66 per cent of total votes cast and took 25 seats. But the PBS State Government that was formed after this narrow election victory was short-lived, following defections of several of its elected representatives to the BN. In the 1999 state elections, it only managed to win seven seats.

Although PBS is not seen to be a new rallying point for the original founders and leaders of PBS, nevertheless it is a party that is certain to exert a lot of new influence in Sabah politics and among a large section of Sabah's community as well as in determining future ties with the state and federal governments.

The Kadazandusun community's new political alignment after almost a decade in the Opposition and, to quote Pairin in his post-Gaya by-election comments, 'rising hopes and expectations' as part of the BN, reflects its gains and disadvantages as seen in the eyes of the indigenous communities in Sabah as well as in neighbouring Sarawak.