

01/08/2002

Far-reaching effects

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THE 1:1 draw between the Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pas in two simultaneous by-elections in Kedah two weeks ago can easily be regarded as the turning point in the rivalry between the two dominant parties since the 1999 general election.

Although there had been six by-elections since then, the two parties met only once - in the Sanggang state by-election in Pahang more than two years ago, in which BN novice Redzwan Harun decisively defeated Pas heavyweight Datuk Hishamuddin Yahya.

The outcome of the Pendang Parliamentary and Anak Bukit state by-elections would have far-reaching consequences on the continuing rivalry between the two parties.

The BN's success in recapturing Pendang and drastically cutting the support for Pas in Anak Bukit should, among other things, dispel the widespread belief that Pas is unstoppable in Kedah after winning 12 out of 36 state seats and eight out of 15 Parliamentary seats in the 1999 general election.

The doomsayers scored additional points when the Pas-backed Keadilan candidate won the Lunas state by-election, also in Kedah, in November 2000. With that victory, Pas became even more convinced that the conquest of Kedah was only a matter of time.

Thus, the loss of Pendang on July 18 was a devastating blow to its confidence. Until that fateful day, retaining the coveted Pendang seat was, to Pas leaders, a foregone conclusion.

It was unthinkable, at least to them and their fanatical followers, that Pendang, which was won in 1999 by Pas President Datuk Mohd Fadzil Md Noor with a comfortable majority, would be so quickly lost. Until his death on June 23, Fadzil was also the State Assemblyman for Anak Bukit.

Pas was confident that the sympathy generated by Fadzil's death was enough to see the party through. Even Umno - the BN's dominant partner - did not dismiss such a possibility judging from the massive 50,000 turnout at Fadzil's funeral.

So confident were they of victory that they nominated novices to stand in both places and, in the process, ignored the fact that neither of them are from the ulama faction.

In fact, both are, by Pas's own definition, secular-educated - Mohamad Hayati Othman, who stood in Pendang, is a medical doctor and Amiruddin Hamzah (Anak Bukit), an engineer.

This led to some disgruntlement among members of the ulama group and the conservatives who felt that Fadzil's legacy as a prominent ulama was being ignored. Both Pendang and Anak Bukit are the centres of pondok religious schools.

Thus for the BN, despite the razor-thin majority, the victory in Pendang was understandably sweet. Its veteran candidate Datuk Othman Abdul won with a majority of 283 out of 45,367 valid votes cast.

While Kuala Lumpur-based analysts and commentators would like to link the outcome of the by-elections to the larger issues - the aftermath of the Sept 11 attacks on the US, the war on terrorism, the Prime Minister's resignation and the economy - the battle for Pendang and Anak Bukit was far more straightforward.

It was the replay of old rivalry and animosity - the struggle between the liberal Islamic forces in Umno and the conservatives in Pas. The

latter had, in recent years, been greatly radicalised by the growing fanaticism of the party.

Then there is the local factor - the fact that Pendang has always been the battle ground for the control of the Malay minds involving heavyweight players. It is a place where giants were made and unmade.

To date, three party presidents trace their political roots to Pendang - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the late Yusuf Rawa and Fadzil.

The young Dr Mahathir - referred to by Pas as 'Doktor Umno' - made his election debut in Pendang (then known as Kota Star Selatan) in 1964. He easily defeated the Pas candidate, Mohd Shaari Shukor, and established a yet unbroken record of mustering the highest majority in the history of the constituency in a straight fight involving Umno and Pas. He beat his rival with a 20.4 per cent margin.

In the following general election (1969), when the Pas ulama decreed that Umno supporters were kafir (infidels) because they cooperated with the non-Muslims, Dr Mahathir lost the seat to the Penang-born Yusuf who went on to become Pas President in the early eighties.

To add insult to injury, Dr Mahathir's private medical practice suffered when Pas supporters started to shy away from his Maha Klinik because they were told by their leaders that he would administer to them deadly injections.

Fadzil, Yusuf's successor, won the seat in the last general election with a majority of 2,939, defeating Othman. He failed to unseat Othman in his first attempt in 1990.

The BN's success in reclaiming the seat could lead to the erosion of support for Pas in other areas. This could spell trouble for the party in the run-up to the next general election which may be as early as next year.

If the BN could recapture Pendang, which gave Pas the highest majority among the eight Parliamentary seats it won in Kedah in the last general election, the chances of it turning the tables on Pas in other areas could not be worse.

Even in Anak Bukit, the BN had successfully reduced Pas' majority from 1,840 in the last general election to just 508. The support for BN, on the other hand, increased dramatically. It is a widely held belief that the BN could have won the seat had its machinery been as efficient as in Pendang.

The victory in Pendang and the rising support in Anak Bukit suggest that Pas is not as strong as it is made out to be. It made an impressive inroad in 1999 because the BN, in particular Umno, was weak.

The party was affected by the sacking of its Deputy President and Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, a year earlier. This was aggravated by petty squabbles and rivalries at the state and divisional levels, as was the case with Kedah and Pendang.

With Pas being pushed to a corner by the inconsistencies in its policies and pronouncements, in particular on the Islamic punishment code (hudud), and by the antics of some of its leaders - including saying that even Allah swears - Umno stands a better chance of reaching out to the more moderate Pas supporters.

The biggest morale-booster for the BN this time around was the success it had penetrating the hardcore Pas areas with the help of campaigners and canvassers from outside the state. For the more fanatical Pas supporters, seeing a BN flag flying in their villages is enough to put them in amok mode, resulting, in some cases, in violent confrontations.

Thus, the Pendang and Anak Bukit by-elections were less about democratic ideals and the loftier issues but more of raw nerves and endurance. It was about Umno and Pas settling old scores. Keadilan and Parti Rakyat, the two remaining allies of Pas, were hardly visible.

And while the non-Malay votes played a pivotal role in BN's victory, the slim majority was made possible only by the success of the BN in reaching out to the fence-sitters and first-time voters.

In the end, well over 80 per cent of the voters came out to exercise their right in peace, thus sealing the victory for democracy.