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2002 - YEAR OF SURPRISES IN NATIONAL POLITICS

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KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 18 (Bernama) -- The year has sprung a lot of surprises in national politics, both in government as well as in political parties, making it another unforgettable one for Malaysians.

From the impending changes in government and party leaderships, the opposition included, the most recent shocker was the deregistration of a 41-year-old political party in Sarawak.

But the announcement by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad of his decision to resign from all party posts on June 22 and his subsequent decision to resign as Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister, is the most surprising one.

Many people, especially leaders within the ruling Barisan Nasional circle, who were stunned by the news had appealed and persuaded Dr Mahathir to change his mind, but were finally forced to respect and accept his wishes.

With Dr Mahathir's decision to retire after leading Malaysia for 21 years, Malaysia is set to see yet another smooth and orderly transfer of power after October next year, scheduled after the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) summit.

As planned, Malaysia will see Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi taking over the helm as the fifth Prime Minister next year.

As a responsible leader who wanted to see political stability, Dr Mahathir had named Abdullah as his successor and had said that he saw Umno vice president and Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak as the most qualified candidate to be appointed deputy prime minister.

#### BODY POLITICS

The year also saw interesting events unfolding in the oppositions, particularly in Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) under by Huguang Siou or the paramount leader of the Kadazandusun community, Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan, while Pas also had a leadership change.

PBS, which commanded significant support from among non-Muslim Bumiputeras in Sabah, rejoined BN on Jan 23, after being in the opposition for about 11 years.

Its re-admission clearly showed BN's willingness to forgive and forget a former component member, which had once stabbed it in its back. PBS had left BN during the 1990 general election, joining the opposition pact but the pact had failed to make any impact.

It was under this same BN spirit that Dr Mahathir extended an open invitation recently to all opposition parties to join the national ruling coalition and be an integral part of the BN concept of power-sharing.

His sincere intention was however rejected by them.

The re-entry of PBS into BN had made the Gaya by-election in Sabah a much easier affair for BN, enabling it to retain the Parliamentary seat with almost a three-fold increase in votes, compared to the 1999 general election.

In the Oct 12 election, BN candidate Liew Teck Chan, 54, who is the vice-president of Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) polled 15,639 votes against 3,716 by his closest rival, Hiew King Cheu of DAP.

Another candidate, Christina Liew, 50, from Parti Keadilan Nasional (Keadilan) could only manage 2,613 votes and lost her RM5,000 deposit.

The by-election was held following the disqualification of former Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Yong Teck Lee as the MP for Gaya by the Election

Commission on Sept 18.

The Election Court had earlier declared null and void the election results for the Likas state seat in the Sabah state election in March 1999 after finding Yong (who had won the seat) guilty of committing corrupt practice in the election.

Yong is also SAPP president.

#### PAS LOST VETERAN LEADER

Meanwhile Pas suffered a blow this year when it lost its Pendang Parliamentary seat in Kedah. Pas candidate Dr Mohamed Hayati Othman lost to BN's Datuk Othman Abdul who secured a 283-vote majority in the July 18 election.

The seat was formerly held by Pas president, Datuk Haji Fadzil Noor, who passed away last June 23.

But the BN failed to recapture the Anak Bukit state seat, which was held by the late Fadzil, from Pas in another by-election, which was held simultaneously with Pendang.

The defeat of BN's Datuk Zakaria Said to Pas's Amiruddin Hamzah who garnered a 508-vote majority in Anak Bukit, was in fact also a blow to the Kedah BN government as the seat was crucial to enable it to regain its two-third majority in the state legislative assembly.

The Kedah government lost the two-third majority after it lost the Lunas state seat to Keadilan in a by-election on Nov 29, 2000.

Pas saw a change in its leadership following the demise of Fadzil, with the appointment of deputy president and Terengganu Menteri Besar, Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, as acting president.

Abdul Hadi, who is also MP for Marang, was also appointed opposition leader in Parliament.

In a spontaneous reaction to Abdul Hadi's appointment, many people were skeptical of his leadership, particularly after the Terengganu government passed the Syariah Criminal Offences Enactment (Hudud and Qisas) bill, which received a lot of oppositions.

Among others, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and women organisations objected strongly to the Terengganu hudud which they considered as grossly unfair to women.

Despite the sea of differences between Umno and Pas, the nation saw on May 8 Dr Mahathir and Fadzil signing a historic joint declaration reaffirming Malaysia's support for the Palestinian struggle.

Many people hailed the move taken by the two Malay leaders who also shared the same stage to speak out against Israeli atrocities in Palestine.

To some, the event could rekindle hope for the realisation of the proposed Malay unity talk between the two Malay-based parties.

Discussions between officials of Umno and Pas to prepare for the talks however broke down after Pas insisted that Umno fulfill certain conditions which, it said, would create a more conducive environment for the talks.

With Fadzil's death, it would be more difficult to predict what will happen next.

#### TEAM A AND B IN MCA

Back in the BN, the MCA crisis between team "A" led by its president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik and team "B" led by deputy president Datuk Seri Lim Ah Lek, had reached a stage which demanded intervention by the Prime Minister.

As BN chairman, Dr Mahathir felt obligated to find a solution to end the rift between the two factions, leading to a peace plan to be drawn up to strengthen party unity.

The peace plan seeks to maintain the status quo of all MCA incumbents

from divisional level upwards till 2005, which means that there will be no contest in MCA for any post until 2005.

The plan was accepted by both factions but the peace proved fragile as Lim Ah Lek had announced his intention to return to active politics, while other leaders continued to speak out against each other.

Another shocking event was the deregistration of the Sarawak National Party (SNAP) by the Registrar of Societies on Nov 5, for failing to resolve its leadership crisis which had dragged on since April.

SNAP, set up in 1961, is one of the four BN components in Sarawak besides Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) and Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS).

The deregistration followed the feud between two factions in the party led by veteran leader Datuk Amar James Wong and Datuk William Mawan Ikom.

The rift led to SNAP having two sets of office-bearers following an extraordinary general meeting (EGM) in August which elected Mawan as president.

Wong, who has led the party for 21 years, claimed that he was still the de facto president and that the EGM was a "coup d'etat" by a group of rebels.

#### PBRS, BY-ELECTION CHEERS

A similar leadership crisis had also occurred in the Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS) but with a different ending in that the status of the party remained the same.

The issue of PBRS's two presidents, namely Tan Sri Joseph Kurup and Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan, was resolved after the Registrar of Societies declared the former as the rightful president of the party.

Following that Dr Jeffrey was expelled from PBRS.

BN had also managed to retain the Ketari state seat in a by-election on March 31 with a thumping majority of 2,204 votes in a straight fight with DAP.

BN candidate Yum Ah Ha, 51, a lawyer and Ketari Gerakan Branch Chairman, polled 7,153 votes while DAP's Choog Siew Onn, 34, obtained 4,949 votes.

The by-election was held following the death of its state assemblyman Datuk Loke Koon Kam of cancer on March 3.

#### MINOR CABINET RESHUFFLE

Dr Mahathir finally ended speculations on the appointment of a new Finance Minister by naming Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB) Chairman and MP for Rompin, Datuk Dr Jamaluddin Jarjis, as the Second Finance Minister, on Nov 19.

He had also appointed Umno executive secretary and Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor as Minister in the Prime Minister's Department.

Information Ministry Parliamentary Secretary Datuk Zainuddin Maidin was promoted as Deputy Minister in the same ministry, while the incumbent, Datuk Khalid Yunus, was transferred to the Entrepreneur Development Ministry as its deputy minister.

The two new Cabinet members were sworn-in on Nov 21. -- BERNAMA  
AFY KGO