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Pas will work to counter 'fear' factor

By Brendan Pereira; Zubaidah Abu Bakar

WHAT went wrong? This has been the theme of the no-holds-barred sessions Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Pas) has been holding since its poor showing in the general election. Conservative Islamic party officials have met journalists, non-governmental organisations, former civil servants and Islamic groups behind closed doors to find out why people voted with their feet.

At some of the sessions, harsh words were directed at Pas. Some accused its leaders of arrogance; others argued that the party misread the political mood of Malaysia, believing that the 'reformasi' mood that provided its unprecedented gains in 1999 was still percolating on the ground. Pas vice-president Datuk Mustafa Ali sat through all the post-mortem meetings. He said: 'I told them they had to be very frank. It was free-flow; they could say anything.'

The veteran politician, who has contested eight elections, lost his parliamentary and state seats in Terengganu. He sat down with Brendan Pereira and Zubaidah Abu Bakar to talk about the election and the future.

Q: What is the feeling among Pas leaders, two months after the election?

A: I think for the majority of Pas leaders, the election results were quite unexpected. We expected that there would be some losses, even in Kelantan, but not on this scale. So we are getting all this feedback from various groups to find out the cause of defeat. There were external and internal matters.

Q: What were some of the external factors that contributed to the poor showing?

A: This was the first election where we came across so many irregularities by the Election Commission.

The Government's ban on ceramah cut the line of communication between Pas, Keadilan and the public at large, the voters. This is one of the main avenues where we can disseminate what we want to reach out to the people. We don't have the media. The media we have are only Harakah and Berita Keadilan. But the general public prefers to listen to ceramahs.

The re-drawing of boundaries also was done to our disadvantage.

The Opposition and BN also agreed on a Code of Ethics for the general election. All along we thought it would be implemented but two days before the election, I discovered that there was no code.

So, we were not contesting this time on a level playing field.

Q: You contested in eight elections as the Opposition. So, when you go into elections you generally know that you are not contesting on a level playing field.

A: Yes, but not to this extent. We know that the media is not with us.

Q: But some Opposition politicians argue that the national media is not credible.

A: Not credible only to a certain extent. Of course, if we go to the kampungs, the NST doesn't reach the people. Utusan does play a hand, but TV is very influential. If a statement has been twisted and telecast on TV, it is accepted as being the truth.

Q: In 1999, the party was able to reduce the effects of the media.

A: It's because of the mood of the people and the Anwar Ibrahim issue. At that time, we had free access to the people through the ceramah. We could ask the people not to believe the media too much. This time we could not say that.

Q: On the eve of the elections, Pas was still quite confident of doing well. Was the party guilty of over-confidence?

A: I think there was an element of over-confidence.

Q: Why was that?

A: Because there was indication of strong support in Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah. We knew that in some other other States there might be some increase, but we could not make up the ground as we should have in Kedah, for example.

There was no indication on the ground that the people were against us.

Q: Looking at the results, what happened in Kelantan was a surprise because it has been a Pas stronghold for many years.

A: If you study the political history in Kelantan, if a party rules for three terms that is considered very long. BN took over in 1978 and they lost in 1990. So we have come to our fourth election.

So when you are there for too long, people might say you have not done that and not done this.

We had financial constraints in Kelantan. Loans that were supposed to be given earlier were withheld and only released later. Ordinary people want social services to be provided by the Government; they do not care whether you are Pas or Umno.

Q: Was the appeal of the new Prime Minister underestimated?

A: I would think so. Personally, I think, Mahathir is a very strong leader compared to Abdullah. I don't think Abdullah is that strong in character compared to Mahathir.

So that's why probably some might underestimate his ability.

Q: Some people say that Muslim voters rejected Pas's brand of Islam. Do you agree?

A: I don't think that Malays rejected us because of our stand on Islam. This has been the basis of Pas' struggle right from the very beginning. But the approach is another thing.

We have not had time to explain to the people at large about the Islamic State Document.

It is not well understood. So when they don't understand fully, of course the perception is different.

Q: What are some of the party's own weaknesses which led to the poor showing?

A: The machinery. The polling and counting agents were not well prepared. This was because of the short time between nominations and election day. We couldn't conduct a series of courses for these people.

Q: Did some of the groups you met feel detached from Pas this time around?

A: It is true. When we entered the election in 1999, we had the NGOs with us. But in 2004, there was no longer the attachment of NGOs to us. So they felt they have been left out. I think we have to accept their feedback.

Q: The elections suggest that it is not easy for Pas to get the non-Muslim vote. What is Pas going to do?

A: Based on the feedback we have, there is some sort of fear among non-Muslims. They have been under the BN for a long time and although they might not agree with everything the BN does, they are not sure about what Pas is going to do.

We have to do something to convince them that we are the people to be trusted.

Q: Pas Federal Territory passed a resolution asking that non-Muslims should be made members. This issue had been discussed in Pas for many years but there seems to be some resistance from the top.

A: It is a long-standing issue. It was discussed at one time, when the

DAP was in the Barisan Alternatif. But at that time we thought the DAP and Keadilan could get the Chinese vote, so we just kept the idea to one side for a while. We just abandoned it for a while.

We have to accept the reality that Malaysia is multi-racial and no single party can rule alone, by itself.

So either you have the support through your allies or you do it alone. If this is to be discussed at the muktamar, I will go for it.

Q: Is Pas going to adopt a different approach?

A: I think from now on, there might be changes in approach. But the basis of the struggle, which is Islam, will remain.

Q: How different can Pas be?

A: We have to devise a way to overcome the fear factor some people have about us.

Q: Is this fear of seeing Pas come to power?

A: Yes.

Q: You have the ulama class and the professional class. There is the perception that the ulama has the final say in the party.

A: We have two levels. One is the Majlis Syura Ulama and the central committee. In the CC, there are more professionals or members with non-religious backgrounds. Policies are discussed at this level. The Ulama Council only handles very basic issues like when we want to enter an electoral pact with a non-Muslim party, whether it is permissible or not.

It is the CC which normally makes decisions on almost all major issues. The conflict between the so-called ulama and professionals is not like what people see. Differences of opinion, yes, that I would agree. There are differences to how you view certain things. But finally a decision has to be made.

Q: All things said, Pas still got 15.8 per cent of the votes. Does this still give Pas the spirit to move on?

A: People are asking whether with all these irregularities and difficulties, do we still have a chance in the democratic system?

This is the biggest victory for BN and they cannot go any further. They must come down. God willing, we will do better next time. I am optimistic.

Q: Pas is still a believer in the democratic system?

A: Yes. Everybody is, including the top leaders. Some people have suggested that Pas should boycott the elections. But if Pas boycotts the elections and the people do not, then there is no effect at all. It doesn't serve any purpose.

Q: What is your political vision?

A: We should strive for a two-party system. One is BN, the other BA or whatever. Because as I said earlier, there is no way any single party can rule Malaysia by itself.

Q: What is the advantage of a two-party system?

A: People are given a real choice, a real alternative. Right now there is no alternative. We talk about BA but it is not an alternative in totality. People cannot see and don't see that it is a viable alternative to BN. But it would be easy to have a two-party system.

Q: What is your sense of the Malaysian voter?

A: You have different groups of voters, rural, urban, Chinese, they have different mentalities which you have to understand. Even among the business circles, they would like to see economic development. To them probably there is no other party except BN.

They won't trust other parties.

Some voters stick to BN through thick and thin. For the Malays, they have the fence-sitters.

These are the people who will swing here and there. We lost because of the swing back.

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