

24/03/2004

The soul-searching begins

Brendan Pereira

STUNNED by the reality check of the general election, Pas leaders have begun a process of self-examination. The fate of the Islamist party is far from sealed, writes BRENDAN PEREIRA.

SHOCK consumes Pas politicians these days. It is out of character. There is no swagger or tough talk, only uncertainty in their voices.

Today, Pas will start travelling down the long road of self-examination and soul searching when party leaders gather in Kuala Lumpur for a post-mortem. These are the questions they will ponder:

- \* How Terengganu was lost.

- \* How Kelantan was nearly lost.

- \* How 27 parliamentary seats in 1999 were whittled down to a measly seven.

- \* How their share of votes in the Malay belt of Perlis, Kedah, Terengganu and Kelantan dropped from 56 per cent in 1999 to 45 per cent in 2004.

The only bright spot for the conservative Islamic party in Election 2004 was the fact that its share of the popular vote rose to 15.8 per cent from 15 per cent five years ago.

This figure indicates that Pas has a constituency of hardcore supporters who will stay with the party through thick and thin. Still, none of the eight Pas senior politicians interviewed found comfort in this statistic.

They were disturbed by initial analyses of election results which suggested that young or first time voters did not support Pas in a big way.

How did they know the voting pattern of the 800,000 first-time voters? Under the voting procedures at the polling centres, first-time voters were ushered into one lane and put their votes into a ballot box, making it easy for counting agents to track the voting trend.

Pas insiders say that based on feedback from their counting agents in several constituencies in Terengganu, many of the first-time voters supported the Barisan Nasional. This was also the case in Perlis and Kedah.

For example, in the Tambun Tualang State seat in Perlis, Datuk Dr Harun Din believes that the support of young voters gave his BN opponent Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim a bigger majority than in 1999.

On Sunday, Shahidan obtained 958 votes more than he did in 1999, while Harun obtained 93 votes more than Pas received five years ago.

Harun said: "I would say that from early reading of the results, we did not get as many new voters as BN."

This fact grates on Pas politicians because all along they believed that young voters were anti-establishment.

Datuk Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, a political commentator, said that young voters - brought up in an era of consumerism - tend to look at the product being offered by political parties.

"In 2004, they liked the branding of Abdullah Badawi," he said. If this was indeed the case, it did not happen by chance. From day one, BN strategists targeted first-time voters, hoping to draw them out to vote with a media campaign. The underlying assumption that drove the campaign was that young Malaysians would support BN because they would be impressed by Abdullah's war on corruption and his bid to improve the system.

Several Pas politicians were just as troubled by the drop in the

percentage of votes obtained in Malay-majority areas.

After the 1999 elections, Pas bragged that it had taken over Umno's role as the standard bearer of Malay interests. But an analysis of the Malay-majority constituencies in Kelantan, Kedah, Perlis and Terengganu shows that Pas' share of votes fell.

Five years ago, Pas had 56 per cent of the vote, compared with Umno's 43.85 per cent. In 2004, there was a reversal of fortunes, with Umno obtaining 55.13 per cent of the votes, compared with Pas' 44.8 per cent.

Mahfuz Omar and a few others blame the situation on phantom voters and the fear factor - the reluctance of civil servants to vote for the Opposition in case of reprisals - but Harun was less defensive.

He said Malaysian general elections since 1990 had been decided by "waves". In 1990, the wave created by the break-up of Umno hurt the BN; in 1995, the feel good factor of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad propelled BN to a record victory; in 1999 the wave of discontent created by the Anwar issue hurt the BN and in 2004 the Abdullah wave swept the coalition to power.

Harun said that he realised Pas was fighting popular sentiment when in the run-up to the polls even those who encouraged him to contest the seats in Perlis were speaking well of Abdullah.

"They were saying that they were willing to give Abdullah a chance," noted the religious healer.

He said that Pas tried to counter the Abdullah wave by trying to 'create the Islamic state document wave'. "But our wave was not strong enough," he said.

Still, it would be foolish for anyone to argue that Pas is a spent force.

Their politicians are disappointed and may retreat into their shell for the next few months. But they believe if Abdullah does not carry out his reform agenda, the next wave in five years may push them back into national prominence.