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Putting Pas on the defensive

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ONE of the most hotly-debated questions of the coming elections will be: What will constitute a good showing by the Barisan Nasional?

Even before nomination day, ruling coalition politicians and their rivals from across the political divide agree that the BN's customary two-thirds majority in Parliament is as secure as the vault in Bank Negara.

This prediction is anchored on the basis of a clean sweep of seats in Sabah, Sarawak and Johor.

But with a new Prime Minister in office, a good feeling about his first few months and an absence of incendiary issues for the Opposition to stoke, there are expectations that some of the acreage in the Malay belt yielded to the Opposition in 1999 will be regained.

Datuk Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, a political commentator, said: "A good performance (for the BN) should be measured in terms of getting back the support that flowed to Pas. If Pas' influence is checked this time, that would be an unqualified success for the PM and Umno."

Five years ago, Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Pas) made some significant inroads in Malay-majority areas, winning 27 parliamentary seats and 98 State seats, snaring Terengganu and tightening its grip on Kelantan.

Pas also dented Umno's claim to be the sole voice of the Malays, winning 27 of the 58 Malay-majority seats. Overall, the ruling party's share of the votes in Malay-majority areas dropped by 13 per cent compared with 1995.

The last campaign was a nightmare for Umno politicians. It was dogged by negative vibes from the sacking and jailing of former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. Today, they expect redemption.

Privately, they talk about winning back Terengganu, making Pas sweat in Kelantan and even hitting the heady heights of 1995, when more than 65 per cent of the electorate gave Tun Mahathir Mohamad his biggest mandate.

But others are more rooted in reality.

Zulkifli Alwi, an Umno Youth official, believes that some of the lost ground must be regained before anyone can talk about the "rehabilitation" of Umno. In his mind, closing the gap with Pas in Terengganu, grabbing a clutch of seats in Kelantan and preserving the status quo in Kedah and Perlis should be considered a success.

"I am confident that we will witness a swing back of the Malay vote to Barisan Nasional," he says.

His optimism is anchored on feedback suggesting that the voter groups that turned their backs on the establishment in 1999 - teachers, civil servants and rural folk - are once again a party led by Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi. Record-high palm oil prices are also putting money into the pockets of thousands of smallholders.

Pas, say party officials, expects a closer contest than in 1999. House-to-house surveys by party members suggest that the conservative Islamic party will retain Kelantan and Terengganu but lose more State and parliamentary seats than five years ago.

Pas believes that 10 State seats in Kelantan and 22 in Terengganu will be hotly contested. And despite findings of a recent survey commissioned by The Star, the party is confident of winning 19 State seats in Kedah, giving it a slim majority in the legislative assembly.

Kuala Terengganu MP Dr Syed Azman Syed Ahmad said: "We know that Umno wants to win big in the Malay States. But we are confident of our

position."

Privately, the bravado is muted. Pas officials know that this election will be about the new PM's vision and a host of bread-and-butter issues, such as the low price of padi.

They also understand that the anger that drove many Umno members to vote for the Opposition or abstain from voting in 1999 no longer exists.

But more than anything else, they understand that they are up against a PM who is difficult to attack or score points off.

Against this backdrop, no wonder some ruling coalition members are dreaming of a return to the days of 1995, when the BN won 162 of the 192 parliamentary seats and consigned Pas to the category of also-rans.

But it would be foolish dream. Why? Because the BN is facing a far superior Pas than in 1995, because some of the discontent unleashed in 1999 still exists, and because intangibles such as discontent over candidates can scuttle the best-laid plans.

However, reclaiming Malay votes and putting Pas on the defensive for the next five years is within Umno's reach.

That would be a good barometer of an electoral showing.