

01/04/2004

Take nothing for granted

By Halim Wahab

AS THE last of the ballot boxes are stored away to be used again, perhaps, in a little less than five years from now, and the counting and recounting of votes - reminiscent of the last United States presidential elections - are over, there are many lessons to be learnt by the various quarters involved in the recent general election.

For the Election Commission, the answers are obvious. Its procedures and internal controls need a total revamp to instill confidence in the system. For the Opposition, like the firebrand Islamic party PAS and personality-driven Parti Keadilan Nasional, it's time to possibly retreat, take a re-look at themselves and re-strategise. For the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, meanwhile, it will now face the real test in carrying out its campaign promises, chief among them weeding out corruption and making the Government more accountable and transparent; and bringing development to the poor.

Undeniably, well before polling day political observers and investors alike, including foreign fund managers, had predicted a landslide victory for the BN, pushing the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange Composite Index above the 900-point level for the first time in more than three years. What they did not foresee, however, was the ruling coalition re-capturing oil-rich Terengganu, which it lost in 1999, and in one fell swoop almost regaining the neighbouring state of Kelantan.

As if in a twist of fate, PAS' stunning defeat at the Parliamentary level saw the Opposition leader tag shifting to the DAP, which has found renewed zest with the re-election of two of its stalwarts, Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh. Until recently, the PAS leadership had branded the two 'expired medicine' for allegedly failing to keep up with the times.

Although PAS has retained Kelantan for the fourth term, it merely scraped through in forming the government, winning only 24 of the 45 state seats, and in the process almost shattering its Islamic state vision. It remains to be seen how the latest development will shape the political landscape of Kelantan.

'The decimation of Keadilan and the re-emergence of the DAP as the leading opposition force are significant events,' notes Associate Professor Dr Edmund Terence Gomez of Universiti Malaya.

Interestingly, the change in tide in the east coast states as well as in Kedah and Pahang has led to political analysts concluding that PAS' ascendancy as the main Opposition party in 1999 was not due to the spread of the Islamic fervour or the peoples' acceptance of the party's idealism, as both PAS and Umno had widely believed. Rather, it was the support of an angry electorate 'unhappy with how the Anwar issue had been handled' and Umno's irresponsiveness to the needs of the rural Malays that tilted the scale in PAS' favour. PAS leaders, on the other hand, have blamed its defeat in the two states and elsewhere on a conspiracy and unfair election practices.

Certainly, there is no single reason to account for BN's resounding victory throughout the country. 'There are many factors that add up to the BN's landslide success,' notes Abdul Razak Baginda of the Malaysian Strategic Research Centre (MSRC).

He cites the appointment of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as Prime Minister and his policies since taking over as a major factor. 'PAS had exploited the Anwar and Mahathir issue in 1999. But with the two factors

no longer around, the party had great difficulty in identifying a strategy,' he says.

Still, some opine that the over half-a-million letters personally signed by Abdullah to voters who reside away from the areas they were registered to vote had also made a difference in one way or another. In the letter, the Prime Minister called on Malaysians to cast their votes regardless of which party they eventually chose. 'I was touched. It certainly made me think twice of my choice of the future government,' confessed a 41-year-old Kuala Lumpur-based Kelantanese, a day before he left for his hometown to exercise his right.

While the personal message from Abdullah may or may not have influenced the voting pattern, it is too simplistic to assume that the fight for the Malay heartland is the fight for the heart.

'I was surprised to see how astute the electorate was. There was no emotion involved,' says Gomez. Razak shares his views. He believes the voters in Kelantan have exercised their electoral rights with their 'heads and not their hearts' unlike in the 1999 election.

'The Malay voters are discerning enough. It's about who delivers the goods and who doesn't,' he adds. The BN's fielding of new faces also helped as 'with new faces comes new hope'.

What about claims of phantom voters? Gomez believes that even so the BN won handsomely based on its own strengths.

There were also allegations of a large number of unreturned votes at polling centres, namely in the Kuala Terengganu and Kuala Selangor parliamentary seats.

All in all, the opposition parties and an independent have collectively won only 21 out of 219 seats in Parliament, against BN's 198, compared to 45 out of 193 seats in the 1999 election. The DAP won 12 seats, PAS seven and Keadilan one compared to 10, 27 and five respectively in the previous election.

The swing for the BN is reflected by the popular votes, which increased to about 64% from 56% in 1999. The popular votes it received in 1995 was 66%. Abdullah has pledged to fulfill all the promises made.

With the near-demise of Keadilan, all eyes will be on party president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail who provided the only victory by winning the Permatang Pau constituency by a 590-vote margin. The former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's wife is now the sole Keadilan representative in the Dewan Rakyat.

'Keadilan is finished. The fault partly lies with the party for contesting in too many seats with limited resources,' says Razak. Although using a multiracial platform, on hindsight, voters have not been happy with Keadilan's relationship with PAS and Gomez says the former should take heed of this.

On the same score, Parliament will soon welcome back DAP's Lim and Karpal, but their return has been tainted by the party's loss of its Kota Melaka 'fortress' after retaining it for 35 years.

BN candidate Wong Nai Chee beat DAP Secretary-General and incumbent Kerk Kim Hock by a mere 219 votes to gain control of the constituency. Saddened by the loss, Kerk who obtained 30,998 votes against Wong's 31,217, quit as party secretary-general and announced his 'permanent retirement' from politics.

However, the DAP too created an upset when its candidate Fong Po Kuan unseated Perak MCA chief Datuk Ong Ka Chuan in the Batu Gajah parliamentary seat.

Analysts argue that the DAP, by distancing itself from PAS, has regained its opposition leader status, reflecting the party's relevance in the new millennium. Nonetheless, it has a tough road ahead, winning only an

additional two parliamentary seats and thus needing to look at itself to appeal to the younger non-Malay generation.

PAS, on its part, could see some rejuvenation with new faces at the forefront. However, despite PAS' embarrassing defeat, Razak cautions that Umno should never underestimate the party.

As one commentator wrote, 'In every three elections or so Kelantan changes hands from PAS to Umno, back to PAS and then back to Umno again.' Indeed, before PAS took control of the state in 1990, Kelantan was under Umno rule for 12 years after the latter knocked out PAS in 1978. Prior to that, PAS controlled Kelantan for 19 years.

It is still a long way to really tell if the 14-year-cycle prophecy will finally be broken. In the meantime, it would pay for Umno to learn from the past.

(END)