

In Dyana's loss, Pakatan must look hard at itself
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COMMENT As expected, the Teluk Intan by-elections was a very closely fought affair. In the end, the turnout of 67 percent was not sufficient for the DAP to maintain this seat, losing by a razor thin majority of 238 votes.

In fact, before the results of the last polling station was returned to the DAP operations centre, our candidate, Dyana Sofya Mohd Daud, was still ahead by 25 votes.

Unfortunately, the last polling station, Sungai Bugis, also happened to be an Umno stronghold which we lost by a majority of 238 votes.

It was always going to be a bold and risky strategy on the part of the DAP to field Dyana as a young, female Malay candidate. I had highlighted these risks earlier when I wrote about why Dyana should be considered as the underdog in this contest.

In this earlier statement, I outlined two possible scenarios – one more positive, and one where DAP would win or lose this seat. Unfortunately, the more negative scenario came to pass.

The Chinese support for DAP decreased by 15 percent from 85 percent in GE2013 to 70 percent in this by-election which was the most pessimistic projection.

This was somewhat surprising given the positive response that the campaign was receiving from the Chinese voters including the mammoth ceramah on the final day of the campaign.

The Indian support for DAP decreased by 10 percent from 62 percent in GE2013 to 52 percent in this by-election, again the most pessimistic projection.

Silver lining

If there was a silver lining to this campaign, it would be the slight increase in Malay support of three percent from 25 percent in GE2013 to 28 percent in this by-election.

In six Malay majority polling stations, the DAP experienced small increases in the overall support ranging from 0.7 percent to 3.4 percent, an encouraging sign given that we were not expecting the Malay support to increase.

In analysing and interpreting these by-election results, care needs to be taken to separate the short term and more local factors at play in this by-election versus the more national and longer term issues.

At the local level, the race and place of birth of both candidates, the promise of a ministerial position for the BN candidate if elected, the fact that this by-election will not have any impact on the overall balance of politics at the national level, the usual pouring in of goodies by the BN and promises for more development that happens during a by-election, and the relative lack of interest in this contest that led to a lower turnout rate, were all contributory factors to the DAP's defeat.

These factors may not have as big of an impact at the national level in the context of a general election.

At the national level, the possible impact of the hudud issue especially among the Chinese community, the lack of resonance of the Hindraf and Hindraf-related issues such as the resignation of P Waythamoorthy (left) as deputy minister and the appeal of Pakatan Rakyat in other similar constituencies - ethnically mixed, semi-urban with many developmental needs and relatively poor internet access - are all issues which need to be pondered over by the Pakatan national leadership.

Some specific questions which need to be raised include the following:

Firstly, will turnout in the next general election be as high as GE2013 especially if voters are turned off by the problems affecting Pakatan such as the disagreement over hudud, problems in party elections, leadership issues within Pakatan in the state of Selangor, the Allah and the Malay bible issue, just to name a few?

There is no guarantee that these problems will not escalate leading up to the next general election and if so, many voters may choose not to come back to vote.

The lower turnout which partly caused DAP to lose Teluk Intan may be replicated in many other such seats.

Secondly, will Pakatan be able to develop a convincing message to other constituencies like Teluk Intan which are semi-urban and are more likely to be convinced by promises of development rather than messages to combat corruption and to get rid of race based politics in this country?

These are seats where Pakatan are either vulnerable incumbents e.g. Beruas, Bakri, Raub, Bukit Gantang, Kluang, Kuala Kedah, just to name a few or where BN are vulnerable incumbents e.g. Bentong, Cameron Highlands, Labis, Bagan Serai, just to name a few.

Rethinking strategy

A different and complementary strategy to what Pakatan has been doing at the national level may be needed in order for Pakatan to defend and win these kinds of seats.

Thirdly, will Pakatan be able to capitalise on its image as a coalition that is more appealing

and attractive to the younger generation and therefore younger voters?

There is no question that Pakatan has more appealing and credible younger parliamentarians compared to the BN. But the youth vote is fickle and can easily swing to BN.

The challenge for Pakatan is to provide the necessary platform for young leaders, especially young Malay leaders, to present creative ideas and credible policies to convince the younger voters that they are better placed than BN to lead the country into the future.

We saw a glimpse of this in Dyana's campaign in Teluk Intan. The amount of excitement and interest which she generated at the national level especially among young Malays was, dare I say, unprecedented.

Because of Dyana's candidacy, UiTM students were talking about the DAP and not necessarily in a negative manner! A Malaysian student in Oxford wrote about why younger Malays are abandoning Umno, using Dyana as an example.

Marina Mahathir (right) praised Dyana for being able to think and write for herself.

At the local level, Dyana received a tremendous reception from among kids and also young people wherever she went.

While most of them were not voters, they will be voters in the near future and young leaders such as Dyana are much better positioned to win them over.

The battle for Teluk Intan may have been lost by the DAP but by attempting this move to break down racial and gender barriers, new ground has been paved.

I am confident that after this by-election, more young Malays would look at DAP as a possible avenue for political activism. I am confident that more young people would support Pakatan's cause to move away from race-based politics. Pakatan's challenge is to lead the way forward and not look back.