

Is there life for the opposition after Ijok?

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analysis Leaders and supporters of Barisan Nasional (BN) see their victory in the Ijok by-election as signifying that it is as unbeatable as ever, and that "the people" have rejected the opposition Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) - above all, its adviser Anwar Ibrahim.

Anyone in their position would dutifully proclaim these messages for public consumption, whether or not they have a sound basis for it. This is done to boost the morale of their rank-and-file members and as an attempt to sow pessimism, fatalism or defeatism among those on the other side of the political divide, ahead of the next general election.

There is a certain degree of truth in their claims - not only did the BN win 5,884 or 58.6 percent of the votes, compared to PKR's 4,034 or 40.1 percent, but also by an increased majority of 201 votes against the 2004 general election result.

However, if the outcome in Ijok is viewed from a perspective of a political practitioner who sees politics as the art of possible, what is critical is that the number and percentage of votes obtained by the loser are both high enough to give hope to the opposition for a meaningful future contest.

Given the amount of resources rolled into the Ijok by-election by BN, the playing field is obviously not level. PKR's share of the votes could be classified as representing hardcore support that is unlikely to swing away when the battle is less focused in a general election.

Electoral support in Ijok for BN could have comprised many 'swing' elements that may not be sustained or preserved in a general election, when the resources of the ruling coalition are not as concentrated as in a by-election.

There is a qualitative asymmetry of the votes gained by BN and the opposition at a macro level. There are also micro signs showing that there was a swing against BN in certain areas such as Pekan Ijok and Batang Berjuntai.

In Pekan Ijok, PKR's majority increased from 306 in the 2004 outing to 584 on Saturday - an almost 100 percent rise in support.

In Batang Berjuntai, it recorded almost 50 percent increase in majority support from 658 in 2004 to 979 now.

Coincidentally, both Pekan Ijok and Batang Berjuntai are Chinese-predominated areas. It means there was a rather strong Chinese swing away from BN.

Moreover, according to one calculation, the relative strength between BN and PKR in four Malay-majority areas - Jaya Setia, Kampung Ijok, Bukit Badong and Simpang Ijok - stands at only 52.5 percent and 47.5 percent respectively.

It means that not all Malays are pro-BN and that Malay support for PKR is not insignificant.

Not finished yet

Seen in this light, Anwar is certainly not finished yet - while maintaining an not insignificant base among the Malays, he has increased his appeal among Chinese voters.

Of course, he was not as influential as some of his over-zealous supporters made it seem for morale-boosting purposes during campaigning.

Equally true is the fact that neither Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi nor his deputy Najib Abdul Razak (photo) could slash Malay support for PKR below 35 percent or arrest the trend of the Chinese swing away from BN.

The critical vulnerability of PKR lies in the 'Indian areas' where MIC succeeded in instilling a sense of communal self-help or co-racial solidarity for its candidate, making it extremely difficult for opposition campaigners to penetrate bases in estates.

According to one calculation, the BN gained about 80 percent of votes in Indian-concentrated areas, namely Tuan Mee estate, Sungai Darah and the northern portion of Batang Berjuntai.

Could MIC and its leader S Samy Vellu repeat the 'miracle' in Ijok when the general election comes around, especially when party leaders will be fighting to preserve their political careers in their constituencies?

Given these detailed observations at the micro level, it can said that PKR has fought a good fight by preserving realistic hope in the concrete form of 40.1 percent of hardcore supporters in Ijok.

The PKR campaign also saw top BN leaders - particularly from Umno - feeling real pressure as evidenced by the fact that Abdullah had to help out his heavily 'bruised' deputy with last-minute campaigning.

The campaign touched on important issues such as the New Economic Policy, the murder of a Mongolian woman in Malaysia and alleged corruption in defence procurement, which forced the BN on to its back foot. The opposition will certainly pursue these issues in the weeks and months to come.

No one has forgotten former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad who publicly called on the Ijok voters to be "wise enough" to "teach the rotten government a lesson".

This made the Ijok by-election historic enough to be remembered as a place not only where an ex-DPM confronted the serving one, but also where a former premier publicly called on voters not to support his successor.

There is certainly life for the opposition after this.

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