

Signals for both MCA, DAP
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Without surprise, the MCA won Machap over its traditional adversary DAP.

As expected, leaders and supporters of MCA cheer the result publicly for popular consumption to boost the morale of its rank-and-file and also to attempt to convince Umno and other BN component parties that it still enjoys the support of the Chinese community.

DAP, of course, also claims 'moral victory' because of the increase in the number of votes it has succeeded to obtain and to decry politics of patronage and abuses of public resources, in order to reduce the psychological impacts of defeat among its supporters.

However, MCA strategists must have quietly felt that, although it has retain the seat in its traditional stronghold, the reduction of the majority votes vis-à-vis the 2004 general election could be a negative signal indicating that there is indeed a shift of political sentiment, especially among the Chinese community.

The reasoning is not difficult to understand.

It is a well-known fact that in Malaysian politics, by-elections usually favour the ruling coalition more than general elections because of its capability to concentrate its vast resources to strike at one place at the same time.

According to the 'natural' progression of logic, MCA should have either maintain the amount of votes it obtained in the 2004 general election or even slash the votes going to DAP.

However, what has actually happened is that DAP has increased its votes in the by-election.

Moreover, DAP has not only increased its votes in a by-election but also in a traditional MCA stronghold in semi-rural Machap.

The battles ahead

The question that follows is what would happen in the coming general election to constituencies in, for example Penang, Perak's Kinta Valley and Selangor's Klang Valley, which are considered to be MCA's weaker areas?

Not to be taken lightly is the possibility that most of the propaganda 'bullets' in the arsenal of MCA have been 'fired' in the Machap by-election and any recycling of that in the coming general election would lose the desired effects.

Seen in this light, despite its victory in Machap, there is also legitimate cause for MCA to caution its rank-and-file against excessive jubilation.

Conversely, there is indeed a valid reason for DAP, which never expected to win the Machap seat anyway, to be optimistic.

However, it would certainly be a serious mistake for the DAP to see the increase of its votes

in Machap as a sure sign that it would land on the Promise Land in the coming general election.

First and foremost is the inescapable fact that during the general election most of its articulate leaders and public speakers - who could gather at one place to operate the Machap by-election campaign to help one candidate - would themselves be dispersed all over the country as candidates themselves.

Without a powerful working secretariat, all of them will have to campaign in their own constituencies, and winning for oneself is always more important than taking care of others or the need to be overly concerned with the nationwide battlefield.

There will also be the problem of the lack of coordination in logistics and the making or presenting positions on issues leading to the possibility of contradictions being 'exploited' by the ruling coalition's more or less centralised and powerful propaganda machinery.

Like MCA, many of DAP's own arguments against its opponents have also to be re-designed or re-fashioned so as not to be perceived by the voters to be 'replaying overplayed Cantonese operas', or accused by its opponents of being 'bankrupt of ideas'.

So, the end of the Machap by-election is also the beginning of new strategising for both MCA and DAP.

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