

BN must learn from by-election defeat
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Barisan Nasional (BN) must learn from the Permatang Pauh defeat and reform itself if it wants to stay politically relevant and recapture the imagination of all Malaysians, political analysts told Malaysiakini.

Dr Sivamurugan Pandian, senior lecturer at Universiti Sains Malaysia's School of Social Sciences, said the BN could regain lost ground by attuning its policies to match the demands of the younger generation.

"BN policies and action plans should touch the daily issues, problems and needs demanded by all Malaysians across religious and racial boundaries, especially young voters," he said.

By contrast, he said the opposition Pakatan Rakyat alliance had been spot on to capture the hearts of young voters during the by-election held last month.

Pakatan leader Anwar Ibrahim won the parliamentary seat on Aug 26 with a thumping majority of 15,671 over his main rival BN candidate Arif Shah Omar Shah.

Anwar drew 31,195 votes against Arif 's 15,524, while Hanafi Hamat from relatively unknown Angkatan Keadilan Insan Malaysia (Akim) lost his RM15,000 deposit by polling only 92 votes.

According to Sivamurugan, the by-election port-mortem shows that BN was virtually deserted by voters aged below 45, as well as by the non-Malay electorate.

Among Permatang Pauh registered voters, 40 percent were between 21 and 40 years old; 25 percent between 41 and 50; 19 percent between 51 and 60; while 16 percent are above 60. Women make up 51 percent.

Malay voters comprised 69 percent of the vote bank, Chinese, 25 percent and Indians, about six percent.

State of denial fatal

"Many traditional BN backers did not come out to vote, which means they were angry with the coalition and at the same time, reluctant to back PKR. It's something for the coalition to ponder and rectify," Sivamurugan said.

He stressed that it would be fatal for BN and Umno to stay in a state of denial as they were already losing touch with grassroots sentiments. He added that his research showed a sizeable number of voters had opted for Anwar because they saw "BN-Umno was worse than PR-PKR."

"BN can still regain lost grounds by correcting its act," he said.

Social activist Anil Netto from Aliran said Permatang Pauh could be the watershed by-election to bury BN's outdated divide-and-rule racial-based politics.

"BN strategies are dinosaur politics," said Netto.

"Like the last general elections, it's 3M-strategy - machinery, money and media, simply did not work in Permatang Pauh," he added.

Multi-racial approach

Netto also opined that it was time for BN to adopt a unified multi-racial approach in future elections. People were interested in issues affecting their daily lives such as inflation, education, business growth and corruption, rather than sodomy, Quran swearing and character assassination, he said.

He pointed out that BN's strategy of using ketuanan Melayu (Malay supremacy) no longer worked. Neither did its bag of election goodies go down well with voters. The coalition had announced generous allocations for various development during the 10-day campaigning period.

However, Netto believed the BN could bounce back if bold and firm actions were taken to wipe out corruption, eradicate poverty, distribute wealth equally and embarked on programmes to strengthen national unity.

According to him, other measures the BN could take would be to repeal or amend draconian laws such as the Internal Security Act, the Official Secrets Act and the Sedition Act. It should also reform the Election Commission, upgrade the public transport, schooling and health system, he said.

But Netto cautioned the BN had first to rebuild trust and cooperation among its component parties for at present, there were undercurrents within the MCA, MIC, Gerakan and PPP. Netto claims these have drifted away from Umno, because of its overwhelming dominance.

"BN unity and teamwork failed to show up in Permatang Pauh," he noted.

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