

Najib dealt a blow in by-elections
Malaysiakini.com
April 8, 2008

New Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak was dealt a rebuke by voters yesterday, losing two of three by-elections seen as a referendum on support for his new leadership and promised reforms.

"It is definitely a bruising for Najib," said political analyst Shaharuddin Badaruddin.

"He will now have to look again at how he is going to win back the support of Malaysians and come up with a plan quickly to ensure the Barisan Nasional is not routed in the next general elections."

The three constituencies, embracing more than 98,700 voters, were seen as an indicator of the next elections due by 2013 because they represent a wide spectrum of Malaysians.

The electorates included rural Malays who have been Umno's bedrock, as well as Chinese and Indians, who flocked to the opposition in the March 2008 elections.

The votes were the first test for Najib, who was sworn in last Friday, and provided a snapshot of the public mood one year after the ruling BN coalition was humbled in disastrous general elections.

The coalition won one of yesterday's ballots, Batang Ai, a state seat in Sarawak, with a convincing majority that showed it remains the dominant political force in the underdeveloped region.

nizar wins bukit gantang 070409 02But the opposition scored a landslide victory in the most prominent of the three polls, the Bukit Gantang parliamentary seat in Perak, which was won by ousted menteri besar Mohd Nizar Jamaluddin from PAS (left).

It also won the hotly contested Bukit Selambau, a state seat in Kedah.

BN's win in Sarawak was widely anticipated, after it flooded the impoverished electorate with development funds, but political analysts said the loss in Bukit Gantang heaped pressure on Najib.

Ibrahim Suffian from the Merdeka Centre polling firm said the new leader must now deliver on his promises, in order to win back voters before the next general elections.

"He has to be able to tangibly make a difference before Malaysians will swing back support to the coalition," he said.

"What it means is that there is no honeymoon, Malaysians want their changes to happen now, and he cannot expect that rhetoric alone will carry the day."

Results show 'rejection of Najib as PM'

PKR vice-president Azmin Ali said the results showed a "rejection of the prime minister and bad government policies that have done much damage to the country".

"What these results show is that Pakatan Rakyat is still very popular with the people and that they want an honest, credible government which Barisan Nasional is unable to deliver," he said.

bukit selambau counting of votes 070409 03Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim was elated by the performance.

"Malaysians want change, irrespective of the new prime minister," he told AFP.

He said the winds of change were "still blowing" after the landmark general elections a year ago in which the opposition seized control of five of 13 states and a third of seats in parliament.

Najib has announced an ambitious agenda to reform the ruling party Umno, which represents majority Muslim Malays, and repair ties with the nation's ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities.

But after his predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi failed to implement his own promised reforms during his six years in power, there is scepticism over whether Najib can deliver.

He is expected to name his new cabinet tomorrow.

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Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/101905>