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Don't blame Pak Lah alone: Muhammad

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PUTRAJAYA: Umno information chief Tan Sri Muhammad Muhd Taib said yesterday it was unfair to blame party president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi alone for the reduced support gained by the party in the recent general election.

He said there were multiple contributory factors which had led to the voters giving a smaller mandate to Umno and Barisan Nasional (BN) and these were being analysed in a post mortem.

"Compared to other countries, BN won big in the parliament. If Pak Lah was the issue, we would have lost in all the states and parliament but this has not been the case. If we analyse it carefully, the contributory factors were not only in the federal leadership," he said.

"There were also state and division-level factors, such as dissatisfaction among those dropped from the candidates list. And there was also the peripheral factor, such as the Indian-related issue."

Muhammad, who is also the rural and regional development minister, spoke to reporters for about 40 minutes on the call for the prime minister to step down, made during a forum on Umno's post-election evaluation on Tuesday, organised by a website.

He said the opposition parties had effectively used the information and communications technology (ICT) to their advantage and BN had made a mistake by believing the voters were not influenced by this.

He cited, as an example, the distribution of video clips of people demolishing temples to Indian households two days before the elections which, he believed, was carried out by certain groups out to incite hatred among the Indians towards BN.

On election eve and election day itself, with the help of telecommunication companies, the Opposition had sent out SMSes to all voters, targeting at the youngsters, asking them to vote for the Opposition.

"The young voters read less from the mainstream newspapers and more from the bloggers and portals. We (BN) are not so much into this field, thinking that the newspaper is enough. That is our mistake," Muhammad said.

"They are monopolising a field which appeals to the youngsters. We should give a chance to the prime minister to rehabilitate ourselves in the field of bloggers, portals and SMSes."

He said that during the elections, there was no level playing field between the Opposition and BN in terms of ICT usage.

"They won because they had

used ICT more effectively than BN. That is the fact. It is not about our failure to influence people or develop the country or state governments," he said.

With the power of ICT, used by the Opposition to instill hatred among the voters, even an unknown like PKR's Loh Gwo-Burne could defeat an excellent assemblyman like Datuk Lee Hwa Beng in Kelana Jaya, he said.

Muhammad said that in 1999, when BN lost Terengganu to PAS, the lesson learnt by the Mahathir Mohamad administration was, as a rehabilitation process, Umno needed to form the Puteri wing.

On Mahathir, he said, the former prime minister had openly gone against the party and if this were to happen during his time, disciplinary action would have been taken against those found committing such an offence.

However, in this case, no one would take action against Mahathir as he is "invincible".

"No one dares to suggest any action against him as he is a 'great' leader. This is the kind of political fairness today. And again, Pak Lah becomes the 'victim' because he was at fault. I think this is too much," Muhammad said.