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Alarm bells go off in Umno

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The results of the by-elections in Rompin and Permatang Pauh have made things more complicated for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. *The Star - 10/5/2015*

It must have been rather awkward for Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir when he campaigned in Permatang Pauh during the by-election.

Giant billboards featuring his famous father had sprung up in the final few days of the campaign, courtesy of PKR.

The Kedah Menteri Besar was there to campaign for Barisan Nasional's Suhaimi Sabudin but everywhere he went, it seemed like his father was campaigning for the other side.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's attacks on the Prime Minister have been exploited to the hilt by Pakatan Rakyat leaders in Permatang Pauh.

As the campaign entered its critical final lap, huge billboards of the former premier appeared at strategic parts of Permatang Pauh.

One billboard showed him comparing Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak to Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and telling the former to go.

Another showed him berating the Prime Minister over the IMDB issue, the words emanating from his mouth in the shape of a loudhailer.

Dr Mahathir's ears ought to have itched like crazy throughout the campaign period. Pakatan leaders, at their nightly ceramah, had quoted him left, right and centre - on things he had said and even on things he had not said.

The GST was the burning hot issue but Dr Mahathir was some sort of X-factor in the polls and it hurt his own party.

What he had been saying resonated with the younger and middle-aged voters, people in their 30s and 40s, the cohort that grew up under his premiership or what is known as the "Mahathir generation".

Gerakan politician Ivanpaul Grewal could sense that everywhere he went during the campaign.

"No doubt about it, he caused damage for the BN. I was born in 1985, he has a strong hold on my generation," said Ivanpaul who is also political secretary to Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Mah Siew Keong.

But the GST and Dr Mahathir aside, the First Lady was the single biggest lightning rod for the opposition. Her alleged lavish lifestyle and the wedding reception of her daughter with Najib was a hot campaign issue.

It was also unfortunate that the grand wedding had coincided with the impact of the GST. The average voter tends to have a simple sense of comparison and it was easy for them to juxtapose their own hardships in the face of the rising cost of living against all those stories about the wedding.

Dr Mahathir was less a factor in Rompin but his criticism of Najib's leadership was there hanging like a backdrop on the political stage in this Felda-dominated constituency. Everyone also noticed how Dr Mahathir was rather too quick to deny that the IMDB issue had any traction over there.

The by-elections, said Penang lawyer and former think-tank chief Khaw Veon Szu, cannot be measured on the same yardstick.

"They are two totally different ballgames because of the different sets of players, issues and priorities," he said.

Rompin, said Khaw, was a straightforward fight in the Malay heartland. It was a traditional PAS versus Umno fight. Neither PKR nor DAP had any stake there.

"But it was a good place to assess the Malay sentiment at this moment with so many things going on at the same time -



Wake-up call: Voters in the concurrent by-elections have sent a strong message to political leaders on both sides of the divide. Picture shows winners Dr Wan Azizah in Permatang Pauh and Hasan in Rompin. Inset: Dr Mahathir featured prominently in the campaign.



Khaw: Different ballgames in polls.



Wee: Made an effort to woo Chinese voters.

Mahathir and Najib, GST, hudud law and the leadership struggle in PAS," said Khaw.

There is no denying it. What happened in the last few months has affected the Malay sentiment.

"Mahathir's impact was not as full-blown in Rompin as elsewhere. What he has been saying is to reach out to the Umno warlords, the ones who can help him achieve his aim but he should know his words carry weight elsewhere," said Khaw.

There has been a spillover effect as evident in the outcome of the by-elections.

Umno beat PAS in Rompin. Yet the winner has found little cause to celebrate while the loser felt like the winner.

The 73% voter turnout was lower from that in the general election but PAS received about the same number of votes. Umno's share of the vote plunged to about half of the 16,000 votes it got in the general election.

It had to do with a swing in Malay votes from Umno and this happened in a number of voting areas in the Felda schemes. It also meant that PAS has consolidated its base in these parts and Umno's core support had fallen.

It was PAS' first real electoral inroad into Felda territory and the alarm bells have gone off in Umno.

The top PAS ulama had campaigned hard in Rompin and their message of Islam, hudud and morality had cracked the Felda fortress. It was a boost for the ulama leadership.

Some in Umno are asking themselves what on earth has happened. This was the stronghold of JJ or the late Tan Sri

Jamaluddin Jarjis and Felda schemes are supposed to be a fixed deposit for Umno.

Their unspoken fear was that the consequence for Umno could be dire if what happened in Rompin was repeated in other Malay seats that were won with only a narrow majority. It sent chills down their spines.

According to an Umno insider, this is what Dr Mahathir has been harping about - if the Malay votes shift, the marginal seats will fall and Umno will go down.

Permatang Pauh was a bit more predictable. Umno was the underdog from the start but it had hoped to bring down PKR's majority. The conditions were there for Umno to make its own inroads into the PKR fortress that Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim had held since 1982.

But Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail's margin of win stunned everyone, including her own party leaders.

They knew she would be unable to match her husband's 2013 victory. They expected a winning majority of about 6,000 votes but hoped for something around 8,000 votes. The result was beyond their expectations.

The small crowds at PKR events had its deputy president Azmin Ali worried. He needed a good result because he had pushed hardest to make Dr Wan Azizah the candidate. Her win also means that Azmin won big and his next project is to make her the new Opposition leader.

"The concern of some PKR supporters is that the generous majority could send the wrong message about internal change and the need to move on beyond Anwar. It may give them an exaggerated sense of security and hinder them from moving forward," said Khaw.

PAS' hudud law was an issue in Permatang Pauh but GST was bigger and hit people in a more immediate way.

But the Chinese concern about PAS and hudud law should not be underestimated. Umno secured about 30% of the votes, up from 16% in the general election, in the almost all-Chinese area of Sungai Lembu. However, Chinese media reporters said

it was also because of the intense campaign by MCA there with deputy president Datuk Seri Wee Ka Siong making several visits to the area.

Hudud law was a double-edged sword for both PKR and Umno in Permatang Pauh. It could win Malay votes but scare off the non-Malay voters.

As such there was something like an unspoken moratorium against mentioning the issue during the campaign. It was the word that could not be spoken but it was there, hanging in the background.

It has been a challenging time for Umno ever since Dr Mahathir began his attacks.

Umno leaders have been unable to explain the issues to their own party supporters, what more to the voters during the by-election.

They had no answers for the GST issue and Deputy Finance Minister Datuk Ahmad Maslan's simplistic attempts to defend the GST made him a target of jokes at PKR ceramah.

The by-election results have made things even more complicated for Najib. He has been under siege over the IMDB debts.

Barely a day after the Permatang Pauh outcome, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin

weighed in with his views on the IMDB troubles, describing it as "toxic" and expressing concern that it might "explode".

It is quite apparent that although the IMDB issue was not a big by-election issue, it is about to get bigger now as more Umno leaders feel compelled to take a stand after a land sale to Tabung Haji by IMDB.

The deal caused a huge uproar. Tabung Haji's funds come from the pockets of Muslims, rich and poor, and it was simply unthinkable that their money would be involved in this troubled sovereign fund.

Tabung Haji has since said that the Prime Minister has advised it to sell off the land.

Umno leaders had thought the by-elections in Permatang Pauh and Rompin would settle the scores with their opponents. Instead, it has opened up new fronts and new pressures for Najib. A bumpy ride lies ahead.