

Breathing space for PMX after wins

DATUK Seri Mohamad Sabu looked more relieved than those milling around him on election night in Pulai.

In fact, the Amanah president seemed more gratified than even the newly-elected Pulai MP, Suhaizan Kayat, as he thanked everyone under the sun for their role in the by-elections.

The Pulai and Simpang Jeram outcomes are highly significant for his party and the government of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

For him, it was the moment when the gloomy clouds that had been hanging over his party since the dismal state elections finally parted to let the sunshine through.

Amanah was also a major casualty in the state elections and the double wins in Johor have given the party a boost, which Mohamad hopes is a signal that the party is here to stay and that it's not just a Malay mannequin for DAP.

Retaining Pulai was also crucial for the unity government to maintain its grip on its two-thirds majority in Parliament.

"You could say this is the first real success of the alliance between Umno and Pakatan Harapan, that it can actually work," said Pulai Umno division chief Datuk Seri Nur Jazlan Mohamed.

And, of course, the ruling coalition can now claim that it has foiled the green wave in Johor, where the PAS influence is limited and where it lacks an outstanding leader or political network.

Suhaizan had the edge in Pulai, where non-Malays make up 56% of the voters.

Racially mixed seats continue to be the Achilles heel for Perikatan while the Umno-Pakatan tie-up is finally producing results.



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Analysis

The son of a Felda scheme settler also had name recognition as the former speaker of the Johor state assembly, where he was known to be fair and competent. That, plus the fact that Suhaizan had contested and lost six previous elections in Johor.

Perikatan Nasional lost in Simpang Jeram despite having a superior candidate in vascular surgeon Dr Mohd Nazri Yahaya.

Perikatan's inability to bring it on in the by-elections confirms that racially mixed seats will continue to be its Achilles heel.

"The partners in the unity government were able to retain their influence in Johor, even in Malay-majority areas where they struggled to perform elsewhere.

"In terms of overall voting patterns, the status quo remains the flavour of the day

with voters, but the low turnout is alarming for all parties. They must take heed of this," said KRA Group strategy director Amir Fareed Rahim.

The low turnout has since been attributed to the weather, voter apathy and the "Zahid factor".

The court decision on Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi's corruption case was terribly awkward for Pakatan leaders who had gone to town painting the Umno president as a kleptocrat in the November general election.

Videos of Mohamed's tirade against Ahmad Zahid back then were circulating like crazy on social media.

The "Zahid factor" very likely disheartened the non-Malays in Pulai because Nur Jazlan's estimate is that only half of them voted.

Nur Jazlan had organised a dinner for the Chinese voters in the Perling area a day before Ahmad Zahid's court decision. They filled 200 tables and the Deputy Prime Minister went to every table to greet the diners.

Only one person refused to shake his hand and even scolded him but everyone else shook the Umno president's hand and many posed for wefies.

"Umno brought out our hardcore supporters but I don't think DAP was able to persuade all their usual Chinese voters to come out.

"We also brought the two Amanah candidates around the Malay areas where they had zero contacts," said Nur Jazlan.

On a lighter note, he said the low Chinese turnout could also be due to the fact that "there is no more party for them to hate".

Hate, he said, is a major motivating factor in politics and the Chinese have been driven to hate Umno in the last few decades.

The kopitiam talk among the Chinese was that politics nowadays is like going to a restaurant where everyone orders something different. But when the food arrives, everybody finds that they got the same dish.

It is their way of expressing how they voted for change but got more of the same.

Another factor in play, said KRA Group's Amir, is the relatively good state government led by Barisan Nasional and the legacy of the late Datuk Seri Salahuddin Ayub whose sudden death led to the by-elections.

Amir said Datuk Onn Hafiz Ghazi has passed his first test since becoming Johor Menteri Besar.

"It also suggests that the residue of Malay support for Barisan is still there.

"Barisan voters were more willing than their counterparts in the other states to transfer their votes to Pakatan to preserve Barisan's strength in the state, even if the candidates are not from Barisan," said Amir.

Are the Pulai and Simpang Jeram outcomes a sign that Malays are thawing towards Umno and able to accept the alliance of strange bedfellows?

It is too soon to draw such a conclusion because, as Aristotle's saying goes, "One swallow does not a summer make".

The two stumbling blocks - DAP and Umno - still stand in the way of a perfect summer.

However, Ahmad Zahid received a warm welcome when he attended the DAP's annual general meeting at a hotel in Putrajaya yesterday morning.

It was a first for both sides, and it shows how determined the two parties are to keep the unity government in power.

> The views expressed here are entirely the writer's own.