

The Abdullah tsunami effect

NST
23/3/2004,
pg. 3

NO matter what yardstick is used, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi surpassed all expectations at Elections 2004.

He won back Terengganu, came within an eyelash of retaking Kelantan, put Pas on the defensive in the Malay heartland and, most importantly, reconnected Umno with the Malay voter.

Even the most optimistic Barisan Nasional official was befuddled after surveying the political landscape yesterday.

Way before polling day, party officials — who were planning the election strategy — believed that the feel good sentiment surrounding Abdullah's first four months in office and the lack of combustible issues for the Opposition would help him deliver a good victory for the coalition.

Problem was everyone had a different idea of what constituted a "good victory".

The more sanguine argued that only by wresting back Terengganu, winning a few more seats in Kelantan and by preventing the fall of Kedah could Abdullah claim to have done well at the polls.

The more cautious said that as long as the BN won a few more seats in Terengganu and turned back the challenge of Pas in Kedah and Perlis, Abdullah could walk away with his head held high.

The more analytical argued that for Abdullah to be viewed as a real winner, Umno would have to reclaim its position as the party of the Malays. This meant increasing the share of votes in the 58 parliamentary constituencies where more than 65 per cent of the voters were Malays.

With all results of the general election in, there is little doubt that he sailed over the highest bar of expectations with ease.

In Terengganu, BN pushed back the green tide in convincing fashion, defeating the Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang-led Pas 28-4 in the state legislature. How impressive was the turnaround?

Five years ago, BN was trounced 28-4.

In Kelantan, BN came within a whisker, making nonsense of talk

ANALYSIS By Brendan Pereira

that Pas under its spiritual leader Nik Aziz Nik Mat was invincible. The final tally: 24-21.

Five years ago, BN was trounced 43-2.

The most impressive performance was turned in by Umno. Its candidates only lost nine of the 117 parliamentary seats contested, compared with the loss of 16 of the 88 seats contested in 1999.

Another barometer gave a better insight into how well the party recovered from the debacle of 1999.

Five years ago, support for Umno dropped in each and every one of the 58 Malay-majority seats it contested. The proportion of votes lost in these constituencies ranged from six to 38 per cent.

It was a different story yesterday, where Umno's share of the votes increased in about 90 per cent of the Malay-majority seats.

This improvement was noticeable:

- In Permatang Pauh, losing candidate Datuk Pirdaus Ismail won 49.3 per cent of the vote, up from the 38 per cent the Umno candidate obtained in 1999.

- In Padang Besar, Perlis, the percentage of votes obtained by Datuk Azmi Khalid in 2004 increased to 66.9 per cent from 59.3 in 1999.

- In Jerantut, Pahang, Tengku Azlan Sultan Abu Bakar's share of the vote increased from 52.3 per cent in 1999 to 62.3 in 2004.

Datuk Azalina Othman Said, Puteri Umno chief, had no doubt that the Abdullah factor was responsible for the ruling party's better showing.

The PM had become the acceptable face of Umno, she said, noting that during house-to-house visits in Terengganu and Kelantan, Puteri Umno volunteers found out that ordinary folk were enamoured with Abdullah's humility and clean image.

Pas politicians were a demost

alised lot yesterday. They did not know what hit them, and sought refuge in the fact that they obtained 15 per cent of the popular vote.

Gombak candidate Dr Hatta Ramli said: "The results in the north were really unexpected. I really don't know what happened."

DAP's Lim Kit Siang had an inkling: he put it down to the "Tsunami effect of Abdullah" sweeping across the country.