

Pakatan's new challenge: To stay united and tackle differences
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KUALA LUMPUR, May 12 — One election ago, opposition flags did not flutter in many a suburban and rural neighbourhood in Johor. But when ballot boxes were opened, a significant leap was registered in the number of votes for the opposition, said Zakir Hussain of the Straits Times today.

Despite the outcome not favouring the opposition, several PR candidates say they will keep trying for the next round.

"They have made inroads - not enough to win many more seats, but inroads nonetheless," said Wan Saiful Wan Jan, chief executive of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (Ideas) think-tank.

"If they can stay together, come closer to each other and be united, there is a real likelihood they could win the next election," he told the Straits Times.

Even as Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim embarks on a series of public rallies to protest against the election outcome, several opposition candidates say the work for the next election has begun, as they seek to revisit familiar stomping grounds and consolidate support among residents who supported them this round.

PR won 51 per cent of the popular vote on May 5, against BN's 47 per cent. But because the bulk of PR's support came from urban areas, where the constituencies have a larger number of voters, the opposition coalition was able to win only 89 seats to BN's 133. The report went on to say strategists posit that PR's weaknesses were in rural constituencies as well as in Sabah and Sarawak.

However, the opposition coalition also faces several critical challenges it needs to address.

The most apparent is how long it can sustain its opposition to the election outcome, as the latest turn of events portends fissures within the opposition coalition. Anwar has called for a series of nationwide protest rallies, a move seen by analysts as an attempt to keep up the election momentum even as lawyers prepare petitions to challenge the election results in court.

Yet, these protests have attracted detractors from Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR).

"The people are tired with extreme politics," PKR deputy president Azmin Ali posted on his Twitter account, seen as directed against Anwar.

"Accept the results... Focus on the people, not yourself."

The Straits Times reported Professor Joseph Liow, of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, noting that to some extent, DAP and PAS appear to have accepted the outcome, having sworn in their state governments in Kelantan and Penang.

A second challenge is the task of forging a more cohesive coalition, said the report.

A glaring example was disagreement over the issue of the hudud Islamic criminal code, which BN surfaced during the campaign and exposed differences between PAS and DAP.

This may now be an academic question, as PAS has emerged the weakest partner in the coalition, with just 21 seats in Parliament, down from 23 in 2008. The DAP has 38 seats, up from 28, and PKR has 30, one fewer than before.

Umno leaders have floated the idea of PAS rejoining the ruling coalition - as it did in the 1970s - in the interests of Malay unity.

However, the Straits Times reported former Singapore high commissioner to Malaysia K. Kesavapany as saying at a forum recently that as long as PAS spiritual leader Datuk Seri Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat is around, he will not allow PAS to work with Umno.

But there remain elements within PAS who are open to such a partnership and may be prepared to take this approach in the near future.

This will be even more so as distrust Anwar's motivation and personal ambition becomes more apparent within the Islamist party, said the report.

A third challenge is for the DAP, now PR's dominant partner, to project a more multiracial image when it comes to speaking up for Chinese interests.

To its credit, the DAP saw two Malay candidates elected to Parliament this time round — Mohd Ariff Sabri Abdul Aziz in Raub, Pahang, and Zairil Khir Johari in Bukit Bendera, Penang.

However, DAP's significant victories allowed BN leaders to dub the opposition advance as a "Chinese tsunami", as the DAP supplanted the MCA as the dominant party for Chinese voters.

The report also stated a related challenge is for the PKR to strengthen its grassroots machinery and networks on the ground - which have paled in comparison to those of its coalition partners.

In an opinion piece in The Malaysian Insider last Friday, commentator Lim Teck Ghee pointed out that while excoriating the Election Commission and BN will not get PR far in reversing the election results, a "critical analysis of their own shortcomings that have prevented Pakatan from securing a greater measure of popular support will be more useful".

"The concern that the PR offers a potentially fragile replacement government and is badly divided on the key issue of Islam's role in the country's socio-political system remains in many minds - even among staunch PR supporters - and needs to be addressed sooner rather than later," he said.

The parties, Dr Lim added, also need to demonstrate an inclusive vision that can get wider support in Sabah and Sarawak. That lack of support in the Borneo states proved critical in 2008.

The Straits Times reported shortly after the landmark 2008 election denied BN a two-thirds majority, political analyst Shamsul Amri Baharuddin said the opposition would have to forge an alliance and create a two-party system in order to build a future for itself.

Five years on, that alliance, let alone a two-party system, remains a work in progress. PR's chances in the next election will hinge largely on how it moves in that direction in the coming years, said the report.

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