

BN's reduced wins put spotlight on 'war room' strategists
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KUALA LUMPUR, May 14 — Questions are being asked about Barisan Nasional's (BN) "war room" strategists whose plans with a substantial budget did not appear to stop the ruling coalition from losing more federal and state seats in the May 5 general election.

The BN war room was tasked with selecting the candidates and advising various strategies to win the polls. It counts Rompin MP Datuk Seri Dr Jamaluddin Jarjis, PWTC chairman Datuk Seri Dr Alies Anor Abdul, Petronas director Omar Mustapha Ong, Umno secretary-general Datuk Seri Tengku Adnan Mansor, party information chief Datuk Ahmad Maslan and former minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh as among its members.

"It was just a crapshoot. Their ideas didn't work and their white list predictions were wrong," a senior Umno divisional leader told The Malaysian Insider on condition of anonymity.

The war room had stuck to its prediction of BN winning between 145 and 150 federal seats and also getting back Selangor in Election 2013 although some senior BN leaders were privately doubtful of the figures.

And by noon on Polling Day, the war room had issued its "white list" of 118 federal seats it was sure to win, but some like Pasir Mas, Shah Alam and Lembah Pantai were lost, which some Umno divisional leaders said reflected the disconnect between the leadership and the ground.

Poster boy of Umno's insensitivities

The Malaysian Insider also learnt that Jamaluddin was behind BN putting Perkasa vice-president Datuk Zulkifli Noordin as their direct Shah Alam candidate despite his controversial remarks that offended Indians about their Hindu faith.

It was understood that Jamaluddin felt that Zulkifli's candidacy would not be too much trouble as the latter had already apologised to the Indians for his remarks which he claimed were made when in PAS.

But sources said the strategist did not consider that Zulkifli would become the poster boy of Umno's disregard for sensitivities of non-Malays.

Raja Nong Chik lost in Lembah Pantai despite devoting his Federal Territory Ministry resources on the city constituency. "The most galling thing is they put Shah Alam on the white list because they thought the Malay majority there would support Zulkifli. How wrong they were," said an Umno source, commenting on the strategy that backfired.

"There are conservatives with a big 'C' and there are conservatives with a small 'c'. The strategists just did a desktop analysis but did not figure that there are new voters apart from substantial number of Chinese and Indians there," he added.

He explained that the desktop analysis done by the war room contributed to the belief that BN would do well and even get back its two-thirds parliamentary majority in Election 2008.

"You can't assume that a Malay majority seat will go back to you or think that you can share the Chinese and Indian votes and later predict you win big nationally and Putrajaya," said the source.

Outsourced strategies

Another Umno source noted that BN had also outsourced some of the strategy to public relations and branding experts such as APCO's Paul Stadlen and TV3's Datuk Seri Ahmad Farid Ridzuan but it appeared to no avail.

Stadlen has been Putrajaya's main contact with the international media while Farid had been seconded from TV3 parent, Media Prima Bhd, to the Prime Minister's Department for the past few years.

"They were spending money on local newspapers with shrinking circulation and TV stations that did not appeal to the young. What a waste of time and money," he said.

It has been estimated that BN had spent more than RM100 million directly and indirectly for the massive media campaign that encompassed print, television, billboards and online sites for Election 2013.

The source, who had been involved in election campaigns since 1999, said the war room had experienced people such as Idris, Tengku Adnan and Jamaluddin but they were incapable of fighting the new media or adapt strategies to attract votes from the younger generation.

"The mainstream media had blacked out the opposition but in the social media, whatever bad we or the mainstream media did, it was amplified online and made people hate us further. As it is, they don't even read or watch what we do," he added.

Election machinery meltdown

Other BN sources also pointed out that the coalition's machinery did not appear to work as well as expected, in a repeat of what happened in Election 2008, against Pakatan Rakyat's (PR) machinery that comprised grassroots members and youths.

"Ahmad Maslan proudly said there will be 66,600 ceramahs but where? It was so hard to even organise one because there were no speakers of national stature or from other component parties," said a winning BN candidate who declined to be named.

"I had to do everything on my own and get people to speak in the one main ceramah I had," he said, adding "I saw others who were just talking to their election machinery."

Despite the lack of help, the BN man said he did better than Senator Raja Datuk Nong Chik Raja Zainal Abidin, who lost in Lembah Pantai despite devoting his Federal Territory Ministry resources on the city constituency.

"Raja Nong Chik was a minister and he had focused City Hall's efforts on Lembah Pantai but yet failed to win. The war room thought he would so they white listed that place but you can see how fallible they are," he added.

Last-minute tactics switch

The BN sources agreed that the war room strategists had made assumptions without checking with local divisional officers and ground reports.

"There was so much raw data coming in but not much analysis as everyone kept to themselves for fear of leakage," said one source.

"They also changed tactics without considering what had been done in the past few years on the ground," he added, pointing out the last-minute switch for four-term Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman was one such mistake.

He said that the presumed MCA candidate Jason Teoh had done some ground over the past two years in Gelang Patah "but the war room panicked like MCA just because Lim Kit Siang was contesting there".

"So, they thought Ghani can do the job but it was a massive loss as he doesn't know the area well although his office is there. Perhaps Teoh could have done better as all he had to do was win over the Chinese voters," said the source.

He added Lim's presence with other top DAP leaders also cut BN's popular votes and losses in the Umno bastion state. "The machinery got frightened of Lim and just gave up," he added.

The source said this was repeated in other states where DAP had made a big push, such as Negri Sembilan and Selangor but the war room strategists did not react as they were just focused on winning more federal seats.

"There was just this huge disconnect. And that was reflected in the expected results and what we finally got," he added.

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