

## **BN should not take comfort in Rompin victory, says analyst**

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**By Sheridan Mahavera and Mohd Farhan Darwis**

Barisan Nasional (BN) won 6,244 votes fewer in the Rompin by-election yesterday than it did in the 13th general election (GE13) two years ago.

But that's not the only fact that should worry BN strategists.

This time, their candidate Datuk Hassan Ariffin managed to obtain 61% of the votes, just 5% shy of the 66% the ruling coalition received in GE13.

The percentage might seem small, said independent pollster Ibrahim Suffian of the Merdeka Center, but extrapolated at a national level, it could signal a larger trend for BN, and specifically Umno.

This is because Rompin is considered a bellwether by-election for Umno as a typical party stronghold. It has a large rural population, many of whom are Federal Land Development Authority (Felda) settlers, a scheme to help the rural poor plant cash crops like oil palm.

But the by-election has shown that Felda settlers themselves are no longer automatically voting for Umno, as the vote breakdown in polling districts in Felda schemes show that a significant number of younger settlers voted for PAS.

### **Reduced percentage**

The parliamentary seat was held by the late Tan Sri Jamaluddin Jarjis who, in 2013, won 30,040 out of a total of 45,849 votes that had been cast. This earned the late former ambassador to the US 66% of all votes cast.

Last night, Hassan beat PAS candidate Nazri Ahmad by garnering 23,796 out of a total of 39,288 votes, or 61% of total votes cast.

The difference was important, said Ibrahim, as the percentage of popular vote reflected more accurately the level or trend of support for a party.

Popular vote percentage is more significant than the winning majority because the latter is dependent on voter turnout, which is typically lower in by-elections.

"The fact that it is viewed as a safe seat and that it is on a weekday would lead to a lower turnout," Ibrahim told The Malaysian Insider.

Yesterday's turnout was 70%, compared with 85.89% in GE13.

"So if you discount the young, outstation, urban-dwelling voters who did not come back, you are left with the locals, who are the typical hard core Umno supporter," said

Ibrahim.

This means the 5% fall in support was among those who would usually vote for BN, said Ibrahim.

Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob admitted to this decline, telling reporters last night that he expected a winning majority of about 8,000 votes.

"The voters are sending a message to the government. The GST (goods and services tax) and Felda are issues which affect the people. We have to deal with this.

"I hope the federal government can explain how we can deal with these issues," Adnan said.

Ibrahim echoed this analysis, saying the unpopular consumption tax and slump in palm oil prices would have affected voter sentiment.

The feud between former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed and the incumbent Datuk Seri Najib Razak could also have put off Umno supporters.

Adnan, however, was quick to add that it was not the GST itself that was the problem but how the government explained the tax to the public.

"We did not effectively communicate to the people about the GST. The opposition confused the people (about the tax)," Adnan said.

### **Protest votes**

Support for PAS came not just from the urban polling districts such as Muadzam and Bandar Baru, which the Islamist party won, but also from younger voters in Felda schemes.

About 70% of Rompin's voters are from Felda schemes.

A glance at all the major Felda polling districts such as Felda Selendang, Keratong and Selancar showed that two-thirds of elderly voters chose BN over PAS.

But PAS managed to capture between 40% and almost 50% of all the young voters in these districts.

In fact, in at least two polling districts, Keratong 2 and Keratong 4, PAS won over more young voters than BN. In Keratong 2, PAS seemed to even get close to half of all elderly voters when it garnered 151 to BN's 162 votes.

Despite this pattern, Ibrahim cautioned against equating this swing among traditional BN supporters in Rompin with a thumbs up for PAS or even Pakatan Rakyat.

It could simply be that in some Felda schemes, disputes between settlers and

management translated into voter anger.

Also, even with an increase in Felda support, PAS still received about the same amount of votes it did in 2013. This time it garnered 14,901 votes, 52 votes fewer than GE13.

"In Umno seats, the alternative is usually PAS, so voters who usually vote for Umno may be showing their disapproval by voting for PAS. Or they might not vote at all.

"I think it is more of a protest vote against Umno rather than a genuine show of confidence in PAS or PR," said Ibrahim. – May 6, 2015.

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