Lessons to be learnt, say PAP MPs

Shock result shows that ruling party must keep in touch with issues on the ground, they say

By PEE SHING HUEI & KOR KIAN BENG

The Malaysian political shake-up is not only a wake-up call to the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition but also a timely alert to the Government here, Singapore MPs and political analysts said yesterday.

"It is a good reminder to the People's Action Party that we should not be complacent to the extent of thinking that our votes will be taken for granted," said Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC MP Michael Palmer, deputy chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Defence and Foreign Affairs.

"From one election, the BN's share of parliamentary seats has dived from above 90 per cent to below 60 per cent. We really cannot afford to take anything for granted."

And the impact and influence of the Internet cannot be ignored, said Dr Ooi Kee Beng, a Penang-born fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, said the BN had underestimated the "political education" that voters were receiving through news websites and blogs.

"In the last few years, the Malaysian public was being educated and informed of happenings and scandals through the Internet, which was blanketed out of the mainstream media," he said.

"Governments all over the world, including Singapore, will do well to realise the power of the Internet and flow along with it."

The resounding victories of the opposition across the Causeway are also expected to have a ripple effect on the opposition here, said Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Indrjit Singh.

"I won't be surprised if the opposition here says that what happened in Malaysia can also happen here."

So it is possible that it would draw some new aspirants...I have no doubt that some people might be encouraged to join the opposition now," he said.

The BN suffered stunning defeats, losing its two-thirds majority in Parliament for the first time since 1969. It also lost another four states to the opposition coalition, which now controls five out of 13 states.

Mr Palmer cautioned that the People's Action Party has to treat the people as a formidable opponent and "not take our eyes off the ball".

He said: "Once we do, we are going to drop a..."

But Non-Constituency MP Sylvia Lim, chairman of the opposition Workers' Party, was circumspect, saying only that the Malaysian results showed that every vote counted.

"I recall the predictions that there would be voter disinterest and that the two-thirds majority was secure for BN. The lesson is to never underestimate the power of one vote," she said.

Mr Singh believed that the challenge for PAP MPs is to convince the people that "there is no need for change (of government) to see changes in their lives" and to keep in touch with the issues on the ground.

That means focusing on the rising cost of living, which is as important on both sides of the Causeway, said Mr Palmer.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan said: "Listen to the ground carefully...and don't ignore their concerns, especially over bread-and-butter issues and personal security."

But Malaysia-born Patrick Mok, 41, who became a Singapore citizen in 1995, felt the Malaysian election results would have little impact on Singaporeans.

He said: "The government and leaders in Malaysia are still the same. Also, the states most affected are in the north, such as Penang and Kelantan. It would have been different if Johor state was lost."

For some Singaporeans, the concerns are more basic.

Said Mr Desmond Lee, 32, a teacher who travels to Johor Baru twice a month for food and leisure: "With a stronger opposition presence, I hope they will push for tighter security, especially in Johor, where many Singaporeans like to visit."

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No major impact on KL-S'pore ties, says George Yeo

The surprise election results in Malaysia at the weekend should not have a significant impact on ties with Singapore, Foreign Minister George Yeo said yesterday.

Mr Yeo said he was surprised to see Malaysian opposition parties win control of five states - something analysts consider the most serious challenge faced by the governing Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition in decades.

"The results were a surprise, but what BN has been able to achieve is still a solid majority," he said.

"Even though there will be a change in Malaysia in response to the outcome, I don't think it should affect political stability there, and it shouldn't affect bilateral relations."

Singapore will continue to work with Malaysia to build a strong Association of South-east Asian Nations, he said.

The Iskandar Development Region, a Malaysian industrial project which has attracted Singapore investors, should continue to receive support from both countries, he said.

Asked if negotiations between the two countries will slow down as a result of the election, he said: "I think things will settle down there, and whatever needs to be done will be done."

"But I don't see there being a major impact on bilateral relations."

He said that "democracies go through ups and downs", and "certain outcomes are not always easy to predict". "The important thing for governments is to respond to the wishes of the people and stay in touch with them. I am sure the BN government will draw the right lessons and make the adjustments," he said.

In the polls on Saturday, the opposition in Malaysia caused what some described as a "political tsunami" when they won control of Kelantan, Penang, Perak and Selangor from the BN.

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