

PR looks for answers to losses in by-elections

Some point to rival BN's message of hope using the 1Malaysia platform

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KUALA LUMPUR: The opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) alliance plunged into soul-searching mode yesterday after defeats in two key by-elections on Thursday sent it hunting for reasons for its sudden fall in popularity.

The ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition won both contests with handsome majorities.

In particular, the defeat in the Galas state seat in Kelantan was taken hard because it was in the opposition Parti Islam SeMalaysia's (PAS) hands after it was won in the 2008 general election.

The Batu Sapi parliamentary seat in Sabah has always been held by the BN.

PAS is one of three parties which make up the opposition PR alliance.

PAS spiritual leader Nik Aziz Nik Mat urged supporters not to despair.

"As fighters for Islam, we should not despair over such a situation because it is part of the trials and tribulations that Muslims must face," he said yesterday.

Some analysts and politicians believed that the twin losses were the result of the BN seizing the message of hope that the PR had used so effectively in 2008.

They felt that the effective use of Prime

Minister Najib Razak's 1Malaysia slogan had done the trick, in particular in Galas, despite it having been derided as vacuous.

The slogan was used extensively in the three Chinese areas in Galas. Opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) Perak state assemblyman Thomas Su, who helped to campaign there, said the BN seized the message of hope when it campaigned under the 1Malaysia banner.

The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), he said, normally uses its own name and logo during campaigning, but not this time.

"It was still MCA, but they used 1Malaysia. It's the first time they have done that, and it worked," he added.

Singapore Management University's Associate Professor Bridget Welsh wrote in an online article that the 1Malaysia slogan, although limited in substance, provided an idea of how groups can co-exist peacefully. She said the PR had not laid out a similarly clear multi-ethnic platform.

Others, like DAP strategist Liew Chin Tong, said the defeats signalled voter reaction to the PR's failure to offer real policy direction since 2008. Instead, it was seen as having become obsessed with power.

"It is a reality check for us," he said.

The BN's campaign paid off, in particular among the Chinese in Galas. Political analyst Ong Kian Ming, who specialises in electoral politics, estimated that Chinese support for the BN there had risen from 48 per cent in 2008 to 51 per cent.

The Malay support had also risen from 42 per cent to 49 per cent, while that for the Orang Asli went up from 62 per cent to 78 per cent. But while both these



BN candidate Abdul Aziz Yusoff won the Galas seat in Kelantan on Thursday. The 1Malaysia slogan was used extensively in the three Chinese areas in Galas. PHOTO: THE STAR/ASIA NEWS NETWORK

latter increases were anticipated, the Chinese swing-back came as a shock to the PR. It bucked the trend as the Chinese community had continued to give the PR strong support since it helped the opposition alliance make big gains in the 2008 general election.

In the last by-election in Hulu Selangor in April, the Chinese support for the PR was as high as 82 per cent.

Mr Liew said the swing-back could be limited to the BN faithful who returned to the fold after having flirted with the opposition in 2008.

But it may still cause the PR to lose the

marginal seats that it had won unexpectedly in 2008.

"If it's not managed well by the PR, Nov 4 can become a turning point for the BN. We need to rebuild our alliance for reform," he cautioned.

The BN, however, did not manage to win back the Chinese in Batu Sapi.

Mr Ong's analysis showed that Chinese support fell from 40 per cent in 2008 to 35 per cent. But Muslim bumiputera support rose from 65 per cent to 80 per cent.

The Galas outcome is a greater worry to the PR because it may indicate an overall loss of support on the peninsula.

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