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Sarawak-Anwar (Election Focus)

FINAL LAP OF S'WAK POLLS CAMPAIGN GETS ANWAR BOOST

By: Azman Ujang

KUCHING, Sept 4 (Bernama) -- The battle for votes in the Sept 7-8 Sarawak state election has entered the final lap with Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim joining the fray with four speaking engagements during his half-day visit to Sarawak tomorrow.

Anwar's presence is expected to add sparks to an election marked by generally sluggish campaigning, which some Barisan Nasional (BN) leaders attributed to "complacency" following the four-party coalition's commanding lead with 19 seats won uncontested on nomination day on Aug 27.

With the BN fighting an already depleted opposition whose 66 candidates are contesting mainly as Independents for the 43 remaining seats up for grabs, ground reports from the various constituencies showed it is unassailably poised to achieve what Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud had initially predicted as a clean sweep.

Taib, who is president of the Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), his deputy Tan Sri Alfred Jabu and Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak president Datuk Leo Moggie have been among the hardest campaigners, hitting the trail by criss-crossing this vast state in helicopters, with Moggie concentrating in the last few days on Belaga in Sarawak's interior heartland.

Shortly upon arrival here, Anwar will hop into a helicopter to Simunjan, about 100km from here, to open the town's water treatment plant.

Then he will fly to Kampung Stenggang, smack right into "Bidayuh territory" along the Bau/Lundu Road, where the BN is involved in its most intense tussle against Dr Patau Rubis, the flag-bearer of the opposition challenge in the polls.

By all accounts, Dr Patau is having an edge over his opponent Peter Nansian Ngusie, the BN candidate from Snap, where Dr Patau was senior vice president until he quit just before the dissolution of the State Legislative Assembly on Aug 15.

Dr Patau's influence and strength is acknowledged by all and sundry and in his constituency of Tasik Biru, which includes the famous gold mining town of Bau, his popularity seems impregnable.

This was even acknowledged by Taib, who has been consistently telling the voters of Tasik Biru to "throw out" Dr Patau for the sake of development.

"Tasik Biru is a problem area for BN. Our machinery is not able to penetrate the area," Taib told Bernama yesterday.

According to BN party workers, Anwar's presence in Tasik Biru is necessary to counter claims by the opposition that some of the independent candidates contesting this election are "supported" by some top BN leaders, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar himself -- claims which both leaders have outrightly denied.

Anwar will open an oil palm estate there. He will also have two night functions in Kuching, attending a BN dinner and opening a flyover, before returning to Kuala Lumpur at 10 pm.

By virtue of being the Member of Parliament for the area, Dr Patau had access to national leaders in Kuala Lumpur, which is why talk in the constituency has been that he is one such candidate with KL support.

Fellow MP Datuk Nazri Aziz, who was here earlier this week, told Bernama that it was hard for him to think of Dr Patau as an opposition man.

"He is very much a BN man at heart. I don't know how he is going to

adjust being in the opposition camp, " said Nazri, who is Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department.

What Nazri said seems to bear out on the ground. Dr Patau does not attack the BN in his campaign speeches but he appears to be bitter only over his sacking as an Assistant Minister last year following charges that he "planted" some independent candidates in the 1995 parliamentary election.

Dr Patau has also denied these charges and his campaign workers have dismissed them as flimsy in an effort to win support from the predominantly Bidayuh electorate not only in Tasik Biru but also in the neighbouring Bengoh, as well as Kedup, Tanjong Datu and Tebedu Tarat where the Bidayuh, like Dr Patau, form the majority of voters.

According to ground reports, the BN is facing an intense challenge in these other Bidayuh constituencies from independent candidates said to be aligned to Dr Patau, wooing votes on the "Bidayuhism" issue.

Probably as a reflection of his popularity in Tasik Biru, not one poster of the man otherwise known as Mr Kojak (after shaving his head in protest against his suspension from Snap), could be seen around.

In fact, Dr Patau admitted that he has not printed any poster because he prefers house to house campaign to counter the strength of the well-organised BN machinery at the disposal of Peter Nansian, his chartered accountant BN rival who was formerly assistant general manager of the Bintulu Development Authority.

Tajem, who is PBDS Deputy President is not seeking re-election.

Lawan kicked up a lot of interest on another front as well. Yesterday, he took out a full-page advertisement in the Borneo Post newspaper to state reasons why he stood against the BN, the only independent or opposition candidate to have done so in the election so far.

In the advertisement, Lawan said he was standing to fight against money politics, uphold the pride and dignity of the Ibans and to check any tendency of the Ibans being used as nominees in politics.

" It's not the advertisement that is of so much interest, but the fact that with most newspapers in the state being politically-connected, it is the fact that his advertisement was published at all that was as much a surprise as Lawan, known to be a BN man, standing against the BN , " commented a political analyst.

" The motive of his candidacy is the subject of much speculation," the analyst said.

Like in many other rural constituencies, reaching out to voters in the widely dispersed villages in Tasik Biru appears to give Peter Nansian the advantage logistically. The constituency is 1,022 sq km in size, the farthest part only a stone's throw from the Indonesian border.

While the 20-odd constituencies having majority Malay-Melanau voters held by incumbents from PBB are seeing one-sided battle for the BN, reports indicated interesting tussles are shaping up in several Iban-majority areas like Bukit Begunan, Engkilili, Batang Ai, Krian, Meluan and Pakan.

The most intense battle among these Iban seats is in Bukit Begunan where true to his name, Donald Lawan (lawan is Malay for fight), the former Snap man who beat Datuk Daniel Tajem (former Deputy Chief Minister and current Malaysian High Commissioner to New Zealand), in the 1987 election, is giving BN newcomer Mong Dagang, from the PBDS, a run for his money.

PBDS vice president Dr James Masing, who is also the party's director of operation for this election, conceded that up to today, Bukit Begunan is locked in a "close fight".

Lawan, a successful Iban businessman who owns a few medium-sized hotels here, this time is standing as an independent candidate, because he says his grassroot support is still strong in the area, through his connection

with Snap, the party which he quit just to contest the election.

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The name of Malaysia's construction supremo, Tan Sri Ting Pek Khiing has also been dragged into the current campaigning.

He is alleged to be supporting a certain independent candidate for the Meradong constituency, situated, in his birthplace of Bintangor, forcing him to issue a denial yesterday.

Ting, a major sponsor of the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP), said although he might not like the BN candidate, Thomas Hii, who is involved in a four-cornered fight, this was no reason for him to support independent candidates.

" Don't use my name for political purposes, I fully support BN," he said.

With three days to polling, the 580,697 voters in the 43 constituences still to be decided are in for even more intense wooing by party workers in their last-ditch efforts to garner support for their candidates, especially in the areas considered grey and marginal areas.

Chief Minister Taib goes into this election showing hardly any sign of tension that was apparent in the more difficult 1987 and 1991 elections.

If there is any sign at all, it is perhaps due to physical strain and tiredness after stomping the ground across the state in support of BN candidates.

But as the utterly relaxed and confident Chief Minister put it in numerous media interviews over the past two weeks: The BN victory in the state polls has never been in doubt but what the BN wants is the clearest of mandates to lead Sarawak into the 21st century.--BERNAMA

AU AAM