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Attention on specific seats, fence-sitters

WITH no parties about to contemplate defeat, the precious campaigning hours left in the Sabah election will be mostly about a "mopping up" exercise, targeting fence-sitters and specific constituencies.

After all, with the kind of machinery available, some strategists can anticipate how each household is going to vote.

This is why, to cite an example, Kundasang and Ranau, are chosen for Barisan Nasional chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to campaign today.

"Those are the two Kadazandusun seats (out of 14) where BN has the best chance of winning," said Datuk Masidi Manjun, the bespectacled chairman of a local think-tank, and deputy head of Kinabalu Umno division that covers the two constituencies.

These two are seats with equal representation of Muslim Bumiputera and non-Muslim Bumiputera voters.

In Ranau (14,452 voters) Parti Demokratik Sabah information head Datuk Siringan Gubat squares up with Parti Bersatu Sabah information chief Henrynus Amin in a four-cornered battle.

Siringan won the seat under the PBS ticket in 1994 with a majority of 1,022 votes.

Kundasang (11,439 voters), on the foot of Mount Kinabalu, also sees a four-cornered fight, including incumbent Datuk Ewon Ebin of BN who also won the seat while in PBS with a 939-majority.

Today, Dr Mahathir will also be in Kudat where the BN candidates are Datuk Chong Kah Kiat (Kudat) and Datuk Markus Majihi (Matunggong), another Kadazandusun seat.

PBS has enjoyed an unbroken stranglehold on the Kadazandusun seats, and is now in the unfamiliar fight of having to unseat renegades contesting for BN.

Campaigning ends at midnight in parts of six constituencies, and no parties are entertaining talk of defeat although arguments and counter arguments must have been thought up for the post-mortem.

Observed a Sabah-based journalist:

"If PBS loses, it means the BN's push for continued development has been accepted. And it is curtains down for parochialism."

On the other hand, commentators will relate a setback to BN, to, among others, anti-Federal sentiments.

Former PBS deputy president Datuk Mark Koding, who once headed Akar which is a component of BN, would not entertain talks of possible defeat for the PBS.

"Why must we allow such depressing thoughts to bother us ... honestly, we think we can win."

PBS president Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan has also reiterated that despite the optimism of BN, PBS was sure of securing the two-thirds majority.

BN has made it clear it is going for an absolute majority - it is either the question of securing a credit pass or a distinction, said State BN chairman Tan Sri Bernard Dompok - while Parti Bersekutu Datuk Harris Salleh remains positive. "We can win at least 32 seats," he said on Sunday.

It is obvious that political organisations have to be confident but having all three being equally sure of winning is something else.

"The others must be imagining things," Masidi said.

Pairin, for one, said while others could make their projections, PBS thought differently.

Supporters of PBS have alluded to its unbeaten track record since 1985, saying that while BN formed the Government after 1994, "it was PBS which won the election".

Incidentally, the BN in its present form, too has been extending its influence.

It landed 23 seats in its first attempt in 1994 and is now pushing to consolidate its position with the help of two new Kadazandusun/Murut parties.

Thus, defeat will be a new experience for both BN and PBS which provided the latest drama yesterday.

It filed a police report on the alleged issuance of nearly 50,000 identity cards to illegal immigrants.

Election Commission secretary Datuk Wan Ahmad Wan Omar, meanwhile, has made an impassioned plea to the political parties.

"Have faith in us," he said in an interview on Tuesday.

"We will make sure only eligible voters who are Malaysians will vote, which is why we are placing ultra-violet scanners in all 1,262 polling stations," he said.

National Registration Department officers will also be present at 20 polling centres identified as areas suspected to have phantom voters.

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