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Sabah-Salleh  
EX-CM WOOS VOTERS IN BAJAU HEARTLAND

By: Azman Ujang

KOTA BELUD, March 10 (Bernama) -- Anyone driving up the newly-completed Tuaran-Kota Belud Highway, dubbed Sabah's best, and expecting to see some Bajau horsemen in their colourful gear parading flags of political parties in this election, is in for a disappointment.

It would have made a perfect angle for the hordes of journalists and cameramen who drop by this town with its famous "Cowboys of the East" image.

" Sorry, you can't see the horsemen everyday. If you want, it can be arranged," says Teddy Chin, an aide of former Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Salleh Said Keruak, the Barisan Nasional (BN) candidate who is defending his Usukan seat at the weekend polls.

Salleh, 42, who is going for his second term, is up against two much lesser known aspirants, Saidil Simoy of Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) and Mudry Nasir of Bersekutu, in a contest many think the BN won't have much problems winning.

Usukan had previously been having such famous names like Tun Datu Mustapha Harun, the father of Sabah's independence, Salleh's own father Tun Mohd Said Keruak and Mustapha's son Datu Hamid as its elected representatives. Both Mustapha and Mohd Said had served as Chief Minister and Yang Dipertua Negeri (Head of State).

Bajaus, who are basically Sabah Malays, form the bulk of the people in this constituency followed by Suluks, Iranuns and Kadazandusuns.

The latest pride of Kota Belud, adding to its famous horsemen and Sunday tamu or market, is the spanking new RM170 million highway that cuts travelling time from Kinabalu by more more half to only 45 minutes.

It takes two hours along the treacherous old 46-km "long and winding road".

" Without Salleh being chief minister, the people of Kota Belud can't even dream of having such a beautiful highway," says Awang Samad Salam, who confesses to being a die-hard Salleh supporter.

Samad did not exaggerate. Driving along the highway, one feels like cruising along the North-South Highway in Peninsular Malaysia. Well almost.

As usual, Salleh himself was modest.

" True I managed to lobby for this highway but thousands of people are benefiting from it daily, including opposition leaders although they keep denying that the BN government has brought about development in Sabah," said Salleh, when met while campaigning in the Bajau heartland at Kampung Kuala Abai, a fishing village nearby.

The BN flags and posters and Salleh and Prime Minister are so ubiquitous that the opposition does not seem to take Usukan seriously.

Samad and Haji Saik Besar, both traders, think that the BN had made an excellent choice in retaining Salleh as the candidate, amid earlier talk that he might be among those likely to be dropped.

" As far as the people of Usukan are concerned, the first criteria for our voting preference is the candidate. The party he belongs to comes second. In other words, had Salleh been dropped, we the voters here cannot guarantee a BN victory," says Samad.

Saik, who organised a "ceramah" (campaign talk) for Salleh at his house told the gathering: " Salleh has been our chief minister and we are proud of him. By the will of Allah, it's not impossible that one day he may even rise to be our prime minister. It's not impossible," he insists.

Salleh, who hails from here, is a political science graduate from a Canadian university. Once Kota Belud District Officer, he was chief minister from 1994-1996 under the rotation system.

The new highway has obviously led to economic spinoffs the like of which the residents of Kota Belud and the surrounding areas have not witnessed before.

At least two modern housing estates have sprung up along the highway as well as individual bungalow houses and small growth areas.

The ground-breaking ceremony of the highway was officiated by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during the 1995 Parliamentary election period and completed last last year.

Atop a hill, an Islamic secondary school is taking shape on an eight-hectare piece of land belonging to Salleh's family which he donated to the school last year.

At Kota Belud town itself, new shophouses are also coming up while the Kota Belud District Council will soon move to a new modern building.

This riverine constituency is also the site of the Usukan Port which for 20 years has been the berthing facility for ships from Japan to pick up copper ore from the Mamut Mine in Ranau, Malaysia's only copper mine, for smelting in Japan.

The Japanese-Malaysian joint venture is due to close down soon due to dwindling copper reserves and is expected to be turned into a tourist centre.

It could mean loss of jobs for workers at the port but the number is negligible.

According to Saba Imam Raya, a security guard at the port, the mine management had issued retrenchment letters to the workers who are due to be laid off by June.

During the peak of production, two ships called at the port monthly with a cargo of 12,000 tonnes each but now it is only one shipment of 5,000 tonnes.

Salleh, himself a Bajau, says the BN campaign in Usukan stresses on none other than development issues.

" The new highway is the just beginning of better things to come for the Bajau community. More such highways will be built in other parts of Sabah, thanks to funds from the federal government," he says.

--BERNAMA

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