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Sabah-Likas

BATTLE LOOMS LARGE OVER AFFLUENT LIKAS

KOTA KINABALU, March 8 (Bernama) -- Workers are putting the finishing touches to a RM18 million mosque which stands majestically overlooking the Likas Bay here, a piece of architecture that even outshines the Sabah State Mosque in downtown Kota Kinabalu.

In the heat of this state election campaign, the mosque, a proud landmark of the five-year old Barisan Nasional (BN) government, surely generates considerable interest in the battle to woo the predominantly Muslim voters among the nearly 26,000-electorate of Likas.

One of Sabah's largest and most affluent constituencies, Likas is the scene of what is billed as a "battle royale" between two former chief ministers, with four others also joining the fray.

Talk in the constituency indicates that it is turning out to be a neck-and-neck contest between incumbent Datuk Yong Teck Lee, chief minister for two years until May last year under the rotation system, and veteran Datuk Harris Salleh, chief Minister from 1976-1985.

The voter profile has even prompted the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) to field a candidate in Yahya Kassim. The other aspirants are Parti Bersatu Sabah's (PBS) Dr Chong Eng Leong, Gamparon Lajah of Setia and Saujin Kadir, an independent.

Yong is president of the Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP), a BN component, while Harris leads Parti Bersekutu.

Yong, insist his aides, knows Likas inside-out. He can also take credit for the mosque project as its construction started when he was chief minister.

And he is getting good response to his house-to-house campaign, including among Muslim voters, who make up 62 per cent, with 29 per cent Chinese and the rest Kadazandusuns and others.

But Yong is the first to admit that he cannot take the challenge from Harris lightly, although this will be the first time that Harris is contesting in Likas, having run in rural constituencies in past elections.

When Harris held an open house yesterday, an estimated 5,000 people filled the large compounds of his residence.

" I am getting solid support in Likas, both from the Muslim and Chinese voters," said Harris, who like Yong, is confident of victory.

The Likas constituency is mostly resided by the middle-class to the very rich. Harris himself lives there.

Likas is likened to a symbolic battle for the BN concept of power-sharing and its electorate is unlikely to be sentiment-driven when it comes to Harris' candidacy, according to Dr Mohd Yaakub Johari, the executive director of the Institute for Development Studies.

"I don't see it being sentiment-driven among those who long for the good times of 1970s or early 1980s where there was easy money. I think voters will assess objectively the performances of the various parties and the candidates themselves," he says.

Harris was chief minister during the "good times" of the mid 1970's to mid-1980's.

Both are good leaders, many opine. And both are afraid of losing to one another and are campaigning hard.

Harris thinks many Muslim voters like his strong leadership style, and dislike the BN system of rotating the chief minister's post, which means power-sharing as a way out of Sabah's political instability of the past.

"There will be surprises, the people want me back and I will win," Harris, 68, said in his Likas home.

This is his second major attempt at coming back to power following his shock defeat to an infant PBS in April 1985. His Parti Bersekutu has fielded candidates in all the 48 state constituencies.

Yong, like Harris, is also banking on Muslim support by virtue of him being the BN candidate and his performances as the Likas representative for several terms as well as his days as chief minister.

"On the account of the battle not being sentiment-driven, and the voters being likely to be objective, I think the incumbent Yong stands a better chance of winning," says Dr Mohd Yaakub.

Harris believes the 7,610 Chinese voters in Likas will give him their votes as they see him as pro-business and can contribute to improving their business fortunes and overcoming the economic malaise affecting the state.

He is also confident that most of the 16,137 Muslim votes will go his way as he is a Muslim.

Likas is active with a host of retail activities, many of which are run by Chinese businessmen.

Harris' opponents have ridiculed his economic action and business plans through a billboard placed at the roundabout downtown.

Yong's camp and workers pooh-poohed talk about Chinese having business confidence in Harris.

They argued that the Chinese would give their votes to Yong, whose party enjoys a fairly good support from among the 300,000-odd Chinese in the state. SAPP is contesting in four other urban areas.

But Bersekutu's Secretary-General Datuk Monggoh Orrow counters: "Many Chinese businessmen want better business and the only politician around with good business sense and acumen is Harris."

So intense is the battle for Likas that Harris' supporters have also hoped to see intra-party squabbles over BN seats allocation spill over to Likas for his benefit such as the failure of BN to field Uzair Yahaya, who heads the Gaya Division of Umno in the constituency.

Uzair, who had expected to be fielded in Likas, was quick to bury such hopes, by saying:

"We have been campaigning very hard for Yong and I am 100 per cent for him as the BN candidate, to the extent that I had sore throat and lost my voice."

He told Bernama that "the Muslims are slowly beginning to use their minds instead of their hearts and they will definitely support the BN candidate".

Uzair added: "Initially, we fought to have a Muslim candidate considering that there are more than 16,000 Muslims in Likas but the leadership has made a decision and we abide by that ... it is very simple."

BN Chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who was here the last few days to help improve the winning chances of BN candidates, had poked fun at Bersekutu, saying if the party's name is akin to kutu (lice), and voters should reject it.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi has on the other hand asked Yong to work harder to deliver the seat. This was interpreted by many as a tough fight for Likas.

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