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Sabah-BN (News Analysis)

BN UPBEAT RETAINING POWER IN SABAH

KOTA KINABALU, March 9 (Bernama) -- With only three days for polling, the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) appears to be ahead of other parties in their quest to wrest the 48 seats up for grabs in the keenly-contested state election.

Analysts are confident of the BN winning at least 35 seats, thus enabling the coalition to retain its strong and stable administration in the state for the second consecutive term.

BN lost its grip on the state when Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan-led Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) ditched the coalition to win the 1990 state polls. The BN, however, bounced back to power in 1994.

According to analysts, though PBS and Bersekutu have not given up hope, the BN has a good chance to win in Banggi, Bengkoka, Kudat, Tempasuk, Usukan, Sulaman, Kiulu, Inanam, Api-Api, Sembulan, Moyog, Petagas, Kawang, Pantai Manis, Bongawan, Lumadan, Kuala Penyu, Likas, Klias, Sindumin, Sugut, Labuk, Sungai Sibuga, Sekong, Elopura, Karamunting, Sukau, Kunak, Lahad Datu, Sulabayan, Senallang, Balung, Merotai, Kalabakan and Sri Tanjung.

The confidence is based on several factors including on its candidates' personality and charisma, strength of the election manifesto, its past service record to the people and rapid development brought to Sabah.

BN is banking on the personality of majority of its aspirants including Datuk Amir Kahar Tun Mustapha (Banggi), Datuk Chong Kah Kiat (Kudat), Datuk Salleh Said Keruak (Usukan), Datuk Yong Teck Lee (Likas), Tan Sri Bernard Dompok (Moyog), Datuk Osu Sukam (Kawang), Datuk Aklee Abbas (Sukau), Datuk Nasir Tun Sakaran (Senallang) and Datuk Abdul Ghafur Salleh (Kalabakan).

The analysts say BN has unveiled an impact-oriented manifesto with its solemn pledge to provide a better future for Sabahans by ensuring economic prosperity, racial unity, social justice and people's welfare.

Contrary to claims by the opposition, they said, Sabahans have not only accepted the presence of federal leaders, they also looked forward to their guidance in moulding a progressive and united society in the state.

The Sabahans also viewed the frequent visits by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to Sabah as the manifestation of the BN's seriousness and sincerity to redeem the state from backwardness.

But, PBS and Bersekutu have made the presence of federal leaders as their main election campaign material, accusing them of trying to "colonise the state.

They also accused Sabah BN leaders of being the puppets of their political masters in Kuala Lumpur to the extent of giving in the rights of the state and the people to be manipulated by the federal leaders in Kuala Lumpur.

Some observers feel Sabahans could no longer stomach these style of campaigning by PBS and Bersekutu leaders who persistently harped on candidates' personality and the chief ministership rotation introduced by the BN.

They claimed the rotation system had stifled the state's progress and exposed the state administration to corruption and cronyism.

The PBS leaders also keep alive the "party-hopping" episode of its assemblymen to BN which led to the crumbling of its government after only 22 days in power in 1994.

The observers say the BN's argument that the PBS has failed to bring development to Sabah under its rule from 1985 to 1994 had gone down well with the people.

According to analysts, despite the confidence, the BN must face the reality that it need to work hard in Kadazandusun-majority areas and Tambunan, the birthplace of PBS and fortress of Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan, who is regarded by the Kadazandusuns as their Paramount Chief (Huguan Siou).

Concerted effort is also wanting in mixed constituencies where Kadazandusuns dominate over other ethnic groups.

The areas include Kundasang, Ranau, Tambunan, Bingkor, Pensiangan, Melalap, Kemabong, Matunggong and Kadamaian.

Apart from these areas, PBS leaders claimed their party has an edge over BN and Bersekutu in Bengkoka, Matunggong, Tandek, Tempasuk, Tamparuli, Kiulu, Inanam, Sembulan, Moyog, Kawang, Pantai Manis, Klias, Tanjung Papat, Karamunting, Kuamut and Sri Tanjung.

The analysts also cautioned BN that it should not take Bersekutu for granted particularly in predmoninantly Muslim-Bumiputera areas particularly in Likas, where its acting president Datuk Harris Salleh is standing, although many analysts say it was difficult for the people to swallow the party's tempting promises as outlined in its manifesto.

Besides Likas, Harris had claimed his party could win Banggi, Kudat, Bengkoka, Tamparuli, Sulaman, Inanam, Api-Api, Sembulan, Pantai Manis, Tanjung Papat, Lahad Datu, Sulabayan, Balung, Merotai and Sri Tanjung.

Observers said BN leaders should focus their attention on the personality of PBS and Bersekutu candidates.

Besides Pairin, PBS had also fielded influential contestants such as Dr Yee Moh Chai (Api-Api), Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan (Bingkor), Dr Maximus Ongkili (Tandek) and Datuk Ariaah Tengku Ahmad (Kawang).

Apart from Harris, Bersekutu has nominated Datuk Monggoh Orow (Tamparuli), Dr Tan Kok Sui (Sembulan), John Khoo Cheo Ping (Tanjung Papat), Abdilllah Abdul Hamid (Lahad Datu) and Datuk Askalani Abdul Rahim (Sulabayan).

Nevertheless, many analysts and observers are more inclined to conclude that given the people's growing acceptance to the BN, the outcome of the Sabah polls was not hard to predict. The BN definitely has an edge over PBS and Bersekutu.

Apart from BN, PBS and Bersekutu, three smaller parties -- Setia, Pasok and PAS as well as 27 independents -- have also joined the fray but according to analysts, they are merely making up the numbers.

Whatever analysis and assessments by party leaders and analysts, the fate of the three main parties is in the hands of the 726,690 voters who will head to the polling stations on Friday and Saturday to decide the state's next leadership.

-- BERNAMA

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