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Election-Permatang Pauh (News Focus)

EITHER WAY, A "SHOCKER" IN STORE FOR PERMATANG PAUH

By: Azman Ujang

BUKIT MERTAJAM, Nov 26 (Bernama) -- " I'm fighting against the 49th most powerful person in Asia. I may not even be the 49th million most powerful person in Asia. But if you ask me of my chances of winning, I'm confident, otherwise I won't be contesting," said Barisan Nasional (BN) candidate Datuk Dr Ibrahim Saad.

Dr Ibrahim was, rather cynically, referring to his opponent in next week's general election for the highly-publicised parliamentary seat of Permatang Pauh, Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail.

It was Asiaweek magazine that voted Dr Wan Azizah to the "powerful person in Asia" position.

Permatang Pauh is the constituency held for four terms by Dr Wan Azizah's famous husband, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the former deputy prime minister whose sacking last year sparked off unprecedented street protests in Kuala Lumpur and led to the formation of Parti Keadilan Nasional which she leads.

This time around, Anwar, who is serving a six-year jail sentence for corruption, isn't contesting but his shadow appears to be still looming large over this constituency of 50,000 voters, and on whose crest his wife is riding on.

Permatang Pauh can well be said to be a "battle royal" of the election on Nov 29, and either way, pundits are predicting that it will produce a "shocker".

Since nomination day on Nov 20, the international media has been descending on Permatang Pauh, the Malay heartland on the mainland side of Pulau Pinang, mainly because Dr Wan Azizah's position as the flag-bearer of Keadilan, the party which many reckon to have been formed mainly because of the Anwar saga.

And given the foreign media's bias for Anwar, Dr Ibrahim has also in the process been getting some international media coverage that he was not accustomed to.

" Even the CNN, CNBC and other international media have interviewed me. But frankly speaking, I can do without their help as they don't report correctly about me or Malaysia," he told Bernama who caught up with him at his Sungai Semambu home here yesterday.

Earlier his aides had warned that it was "almost impossible" to get Dr Ibrahim as he "is all over the place" on his campaign trail with polling just three days away.

Dr Ibrahim, who is Anwar's childhood friend, and who cut his teeth in politics when Anwar appointed him his political secretary in the 1980's, is putting on a gruelling campaign pace in his bid to retain the seat, long acknowledged as his former mentor's stronghold.

" I manage to sleep for three hours a day at the most now, perhaps you could say that I hardly sleep," said Dr Ibrahim, 53, the Deputy Transport Minister when parliament was dissolved on Nov 11 to pave the way for the snap polls.

He makes at least 15 speeches a day, shaking hundreds of hands and admits to fighting an uphill task. But he says his chances hinge on what Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself calls the "silent majority" who are perceived to be BN's traditional supporters.

Dr Ibrahim said as a result of Anwar's ouster from Umno, the linchpin of the ruling BN coalition, there is an obvious split among the Malays who

form 66 per cent of the electorate in Permatang Pauh.

" There is a split but what is very sad for me to see is that young Keadilan campaign workers going about their business without respect to the elders and this is indeed very disturbing," he said.

Asked what he meant, Dr Ibrahim said they went about booing BN supporters and causing some tense situation.

Asked about his feelings for Anwar, he said: " Of course I sympathise with him, I'm only human. But I have to make it clear that this election is not about emotions. It is about choosing a strong and stable government which only the BN can provide," said Dr Ibrahim, quoting the words of Dr Mahathir himself.

Sympathy voters are what Dr Wan Azizah, 47, is said to be wooing in her campaign trail.

According to Dr Ibrahim, Dr Wan Azizah's style of campaign is to "hug the children and cry" in her house-to-house campaign, without talking about national issues like a political party fighting any election should.

Better known to Keadilan supporters as "Kak Wan", Dr Wan Azizah wasn't around when Bernama visited the constituency -- she was campaigning for the party's candidates in Sabah -- to check on Dr Ibrahim's claim.

But supporters of both sides say there is no personal attack in the campaign by the two candidates and this is understandable given their background.

Asked by reporters on nomination day about Anwar, Dr Ibrahim said: "He's my good friend. I suppose we will always remain friends."

He told about 400 Chinese residents at a ceramah (talk) in Sungai Lembu on Monday night: "I'm contesting against my simoe (master's wife in Cantonese).

Both sides are upbeat about each other's chances.

Hairuddin Othman, the Keadilan candidate for the Seberang Jaya state seat under the Permatang Pauh parliamentary constituency, said the support for Dr Wan Azizah was overwhelming.

" You could see very enthusiastic crowds and even volunteers from all walks of life including among the Chinese residents to help in her campaigning," he said.

The Chinese voters who make up about 28 per cent of the electorate, are said to be a crucial factor in deciding who will win the seat, given the reported split among the Malays.

Some Chinese shopkeepers met by Bernama said there was "considerable" support for Keadilan among the community because Permatang Pauh had seen much development under Anwar.

Analysts in the area also point to the 8,000-odd voters who went for the PAS and DAP candidates who stood against Anwar in the 1995 election, which Anwar won by a 16,150-vote majority.

" Kak Wan can count on them this time because these are die-hard supporters who are unlikely to change their allegiance and vote the BN," said Hairuddin, 39, a lawyer who is contesting the general election for the first time.

Aminuddin Ariffin, managing director of Dinastia Jati Sdn Bhd, a Kuala Lumpur-based company supplying oil and gas equipment, is one many friends of Dr Ibrahim who "balik kampung" to help him in the campaigning.

" I think Dr Ibrahim has the edge if more and more people who are confused by the Anwar affair think deeper and hard and vote for continuity and stability in the next three days to polling," he said.

But pundits said the results would be too close to predict and Permatang Pauh could well live to be its billing as a battle royal.

-- BERNAMA

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