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Independent candidate pulls out from contest

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KOTA KINABALU, Sat. - With six campaigning days left in the Sabah election, an independent candidate has pulled out.

His withdrawal came amid growing speculation that some of the other 26 independents and aspirants from minor parties may also withdraw.

The main parties, meanwhile, stepped up their offensive.

Barisan Nasional chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad concluded a whirlwind campaign today.

The campaign took him to five meet-the-people sessions in 36 hours.

With other Umno big guns like Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak also in Sabah, Dr Mahathir told a Press conference before leaving for Labuan that he would be back next week for the final round of campaigning.

Officials said the Prime Minister would return to the campaign trail on Wednesday and Thursday, just before polling day on March 12-13.

Tonight, Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan of Parti Bersatu Sabah appeared at a ceramah here in conjunction with its 14th anniversary celebrations.

And, Parti Bersekutu has advertised in newspapers its open house at the residence of Datuk Harris Salleh tomorrow.

At the Press conference, Dr Mahathir spoke of the large turnout at the places he went.

He reiterated his optimism that the BN would win.

"All the communities seem to support or at least show interest in supporting the BN," he said.

Elaborating on the salient points of his speeches during his tour, Dr Mahathir, touching on Federal-State ties, denounced the pledge by PBS and Bersekutu to work with the Federal Government as trying to hoodwink voters.

He also pointed out on the need for a big win for BN.

Dr Mahathir said a Government surviving on one or two seat-majority would be exposed to crossovers by dissatisfied Assemblymen.

Asked to comment on a hypothetical situation of a "hung" State Assembly like it was in 1994 when PBS took 25 seats against BN's 23, Dr Mahathir said: "I don't think this is going to happen."

In 1994, the BN faced a difficult time, unable to put up posters or establish operation rooms in certain areas.

But the people, he said, had changed their perception after assessing the performance of the BN Government.

Stressing the need for continuity at the Federal Government, he said regardless of whether a Chinese, a non-Muslim Bumiputera or a Muslim Bumiputera became Chief Minister, it would be the same Government at the centre.

Asked whether a good showing by the BN may lead to an early general election, he said: "We do general elections when we think it is good for us ... we are going to win."

"It does not mean that because we do well here, we would have good showing there (peninsula)."

However, a strong BN performance might force opposition parties to crack and lose their objectives, he said.

Meanwhile, the first independent candidate to bow out is Badal @ Samsuddin Kamsa, one of six aspirants for the Kalabakan seat in Tawau.

With 21 of the 32 independent candidates losing their deposits in 1994, what the other "minor" candidates will do next has been the subject of much speculation.

"Wait until Monday," said a Parti Setia candidate when asked whether he would pull out.

It is learnt that the PBS was trying to persuade three renegades - Conrad Mojuntin (Moyog), Paul Tom Imbayan (Bengkoka) and Dausin Pangalin (Tempasuk) - contesting as independents to withdraw.

Imbayan and Pangalin were the PBS candidates for Bengkoka and Tempasuk in the 1994 election but both lost.

Pasok, the oldest surviving party in Sabah, issued a statement today distancing itself from the sole candidate contesting under its banner, Cletus S. Mojingol.

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