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Issues covering personalities, feuds and human drama waiting to unfold

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AS the Sabah State elections get under way, issues like personalities, feuds and human drama will take centre stage.

Datuk Harris Salleh's Parti Bersekutu, one of the three parties eyeing the seat of power by contesting all 48 seats, has had a headstart of sorts, having named all its candidates.

Harris is boldly predicting that his party will take 40 seats.

Pas has thus far named 10 candidates, while the oldest surviving party in Sabah, Pasuk, has paraded 18 of its candidates.

On his part, Sabah Umno chief Datuk Osu Sukam will journey to Kuala Lumpur soon to meet party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to finalise the list of party candidates contesting under the Barisan Nasional ticket.

With the Press persistently seeking insight into the likely nature of BN candidates like how many seats each of the component parties will contest, Chief Minister and State BN chairman Tan Sri Bernard Dompok remained tight-lipped yesterday.

"I don't have to enter into a dialogue with the Press," he told a Press conference to announce the dissolution of the State Assembly, a date, he later said, the Press had got wind of in advance.

In the dissolved Assembly, Umno had 21 members, Dompok's Parti Demokratik Sabah (11), Sabah Progressive Party (five), Akar (three) and Datuk Joseph Kurup's Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (two).

This is the first election for the expanded BN in Sabah as PDS and PBRs were formed after the February 1994 polls.

Parti Bersatu Sabah whose leader, Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan, was yesterday campaigning in Sandakan, has not named the party's candidates.

This, according to Pairin, was a strategy to ward off possible suitors, or in his words, "to prevent them from being disturbed by other parties".

Dr Mohd Yaakub Johari, executive director of the Institute for Development Studies (Sabah), said there were pros and cons of naming candidates early.

"Once the question has been settled, candidates will commit their resources ..." said an observer.

Which is why, some observers believed, Bersekutu has already started the poster war.

When this scenario was put to him, Datuk Pandikar Amin Mulia, president of Akar, raised his pitch "BN is the biggest party in the country and I will work hard to ensure victory for all BN candidates regardless of who they are."

How much time the contesting parties have in order to mull over the selection of candidates will depend on the date for nomination to be fixed by the Election Commission.

Indications are that the parties may have something like a week to decide on issues said to be the key in the current chapter of Sabah elections.

"Localised issues in the constituencies will figure prominently," said a political scientist.

Thus, observers said, parties could not afford a falling out resulting from the choice of candidates as they vied to win the hearts of voters.

Voters like Logimin Sowrioh, 62, of Penampang, pointed to his heart when asked whether he had decided who to vote for.

Still, it is widely accepted that the main personalities will be defending their seats as in the case of Dompok (Moyog), Osu (Kawang) and Pairin (Tambunan).

In some instances, the candidates will inspire human interest stories as in the case of the children of former Chief Minister, the late Tun Datu Mustapha Harun, and the Kitingan brothers - Pairin and Jeffrey.

There will be major contests, too, like the one shaping up in Likas involving two former Chief Ministers, Datuk Yong Teck Lee for SAPP and Harris.

In the meantime, as whispers on varied ratings concerning the prospects of the main parties waft, campaigners will comb this vast State with more vigour.

With the dissolution of the State Assembly, there is the added legitimacy to what they have been doing for months in the form of various gatherings.

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