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Sabah-Keningau

MAHATHIR'S VISIT SETS KENINGAU BUZZING AMID POLLS

By: Eddy Lok

KENINGAU, Feb 21 (Bernama) -- This was a tiny remote town in the old days when Dr Mahathir Mohamad first stepped foot for a visit with the late Tun Abdul Razak. Sabah had joined Malaysia two years earlier but the British presence was still very much felt then.

It was in 1965, as the Prime Minister himself recalled fondly on Friday.

A visibly pleased Dr Mahathir told thousands of Keningau residents comprising urbane-looking residents and elderly natives and their children who had turned up at the community hall to hear him speak, how Keningau had changed for the better.

And, he promised them more.

He had come not only to drum up support for the Barisan Nasional (BN) candidates in the coming state election in the heartland of the Kadazandusun-based Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) but to have a first-hand look at the situation and the needs of the people in the interior.

Dr Mahathir who has frequently travelled to Sabah, told the huge crowd during his speech that Keningau might be far in distance but not from his heart, quoting the Malay proverb "jauh di mata, dekat di hati".

He promised better days ahead if the people vote for the BN at the polls due any time now.

There was excitement in the town about his presence. The rustic nature and warmth of the place was evident as the general public was heard talking about Dr Mahathir being in town.

In Sabah, rural communities are characterised by their welcoming nature and excitement whenever there are visitors, and a VIP visitor in Dr Mahathir undoubtedly worked them up.

"Bagus bah (it's good)... we are very happy Dr Mahathir has finally come to visit us in Keningau," said Nordin Kundian, 69, showing the thumbs-up sign while seated in a mini-bus waiting to take him home after attending the welcoming ceremony for the Prime Minister at a nearby community hall.

"People like him as our leader," added Nordin, who described himself as an "orang kampung" (village man).

The local economy seems active with retailers, coffeeshops and restaurants busy days before he arrived as workers of the BN component parties prepared for the visit.

The immense activities and many modern-day buildings and shophouses in the town were perhaps the difference Dr Mahathir had noticed compared to his last visit about three and a half decades ago together with the then Deputy Prime Minister Razak to a quiet town.

Dr Mahathir was supposed to come here last December to open the congress of the Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS), one of the nine BN component parties, led by former PBS strongman and current Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Joseph Kurup. Inclement weather then prevented that.

Still, there had been no loss of eagerness. Keningau folks appeared anxious and excited at dawn Friday as word spread that Dr Mahathir was coming to town.

There was a hive of activities, with BN flags fluttering and streamers and banners announcing and welcoming the visit.

Punctuating the sea of navy blue BN flags and banners were billboards bearing the colours and portraits of PBS president and former Chief

Minister Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan and his brother Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan.

Workers of the BN component parties and local politicians, especially those aiming to be fielded as BN candidates, are silently hoping that Dr Mahathir's visit could boost their political fortunes in this Kadazandusun interior traditionally the stronghold of PBS.

They may have some reasons to hope although nobody expects both Pairin and Dr Jeffrey, who will stand in Tambunan and Bingkor respectively, two of three state seats in the larger Keningau parliamentary constituency, to be beaten in the coming polls.

There is a joke in Tambunan that the saddest candidate in this election would be the ones fielded to face Pairin. Pairin is talking about returning to power and hardly anybody talks about him failing to get re-elected in Tambunan.

But for Petrus Mukilin, 46, the BN's chances in Keningau are not hopeless and Dr Mahathir's visit might give it a boost.

"I am very proud he (Dr Mahathir) came to Keningau... I am sure, to many here, that it is a historic event which they will remember him for," said Petrus, a school headmaster and chairman of the village development and security committee of Kampung Kepayan Lama in Apin Apin here.

Dr Mahathir had earlier that morning told the crowd that he would give equal attention to Keningau's development.

"Believe me, this won't be my last visit here," he added.

On the Prime Minister's speech, Petrus said: "I feel he has given inspiration to the people... the people should support the BN for our children's future."

"What is the use of too much politics if our children cannot go far in their education. We should give them a good education because they are our future," he said of the poor standard of education in the rural areas.

He wished to see improved education facilities and opportunities for rural children in the state, with "Kuala Lumpur's help".

Taxi driver Lasamat Mobing, who plies between Keningau town and the state capital Kota Kinabalu, said BN candidates might receive more votes with Dr Mahathir's wooing but it might not be enough though for them to win the seats in this PBS stronghold.

"It will be good to support the BN but it is not easy to finish off the two brothers. I don't think the Prime Minister's visit could change very much the political realities because of the Kadazandusun's sentiment for the PBS," he added.

Others feel the older voters might not pay much attention to the development promises. And, political stability was never an issue and should never be an issue.

Like many other towns in Sabah, Keningau has its fair share of facilities such as schools and a district hospital as well as a sports complex.

Kurup, who was once tipped to be Chief Minister under the rotation system but missed the boat in favour of Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, gave a rather lengthy 30-minute speech in praise of Dr Mahathir's leadership at the gathering.

"Dr Mahathir's visit has improved my chances of winning in the election. I am much more confident now," he told Bernama a day later in Kota Kinabalu.

-- BERNAMA

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