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Main contesting parties confident of ruling state

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WITH just days left before the ninth Sabah State Elections this weekend, each of the three main players contesting the 48 seats has announced that it will form the next State Government.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who came for a whirlwind campaign last week and will return this week, said the Barisan Nasional (BN) will emerge from the election with a fresh mandate to govern the State with an overwhelming majority.

Parti Bersatu Sabah's Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan, who is contemplating the prospect of being re-elected a state assemblyman for the eighth time at Tambunan, said the PBS that will form the State Government with more than two-thirds majority.

Dark horse Parti Barisan Rakyat Sabah Bersekutu, led by Datuk Harris Salleh, said his party will rule with more than 32 seats.

All this confidence, however, belies the fact that there is only one constant in Sabah politics, and that there are too many variables than can be counted on to produce a sure thing.

While the BN can rely on its strong support from the Muslim areas to ensure a good showing at the polls for its candidates of all races, it is concerned with how Bersekutu and PAS, which is fielding six candidates, can split the vote.

PBS is seen as the real competitor to BN's aspirations but is still haunted by a "loyalty" crisis after the 1994 episode, when several of its elected State Assemblymen defected soon after the elections that year and brought down the State Government because it could not maintain a majority in the State Assembly. The party has asked its candidates to pledge property as collateral to guarantee no crossovers in this particular elections.

Bersekutu's president Datuk Harris said yesterday his party is confident of winning the majority of the 48 seats contested. But it is accepted here that Bersekutu's main role in the elections is that of a spoiler.

"Bersekutu can pose a serious problem to BN in Muslim-dominated areas of Sabah in its fight against PBS, but there is uncertainty on how Harris will play his hand if he wins enough seats so the PBS is also worried," said a political analyst.

The desire for all the three contestants to win with an overwhelming majority is easy to understand. A simple majority by any one party would be hard to maintain, and worse - it could force coalition between political foes.

Dr Mahathir said the door is closed for PBS' Pairin and Bersekutu's Harris re-admission into the BN after the polls.

But both PBS and Bersekutu is confident that nothing is finite, especially in Sabah politics. When asked to respond to Dr Mahathir's statement last week that he was "hard to deal with", Harris said:

"I am difficult to deal with only if things for Sabah were unreasonable, but I have nothing personal against (Dr Mahathir)."

PBS, while publicly dismissing the prospect of its re-admission into the BN, is hoping for better Federal relations and a healing of the rift between the BN and PBS when Pairin pulled the party out of the BN practically on the eve of the 1990 general elections to support the Opposition.

"There is no permanent reason why PBS and Kuala Lumpur cannot improve

its relationship after elections or in the near future. After all, a spirit of cooperation and compromise is to the benefit of both sides, especially at a time when the whole country is facing a difficult economic crisis," said PBS deputy president Dr Maximus Ongkili yesterday.

The relationship between Sabah and the Federal Government has always been special. For many Malaysians, the Sabah elections has always been regarded as a barometer of the BN's chances at a general elections. But Dr Mahathir has put paid to that theory when he dismissed the idea on Saturday.

The general elections would not depend on the outcome this weekend because "it doesn't mean that because we win here we'll have a good showing there," he said, adding that he was happy with the support that the BN has going into the elections and how the campaigning has been going.

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