

13/03/1999

Outcome of an election thriller will have far-reaching consequences

Rashid Yusof; Joniston Bangkuai; Jaswinder Kaur

A MODEST room in Kota Kinabalu will be the focal point tonight for the outcome of a thriller of an election which will determine how durable the next Sabah administration will be and the shape of its political landscape.

With implications of the result possibly reaching beyond Sabah shores, attention will be focused on this room at the Federal House which is the Election Commission's nerve centre or the central operations room.

Eight facsimile machines and numerous officials will work the telephones compiling results for the 48 seats before they are released.

This will come after first, men on foot, then officials in 55 four-wheel-drive vehicles, aboard eight helicopters and 47 boats bring out ballot papers from the remote areas to tallying centres as everyone awaits in anticipation.

Although returning officers will announce results at the respective tallying centres and contestants likely to work out unofficial scores in advance, the official overall tally will be put up on a scoreboard in this operations room.

Even as the climax of months of cajoling beckons, the intensity of the campaign (Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was in Sabah three times between Feb 18 and March 11) will swiftly be overtaken by events to unfold tonight.

Firstly, there will be a frantic sum-game, and much hinges on how big a margin the eventual victor secures.

The last election did produce a winner, Parti Bersatu Sabah, but it secured a simple majority of 25 against 23 for the Barisan Nasional. PBS president Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan waited to be sworn in as Chief Minister for 36 hours at the Istana gates.

Similarly, an inconclusive result this time, may well spawn a whole new episode of twists and surprises.

Hovering to report on consequences of a deadlock this time will be a big contingent of foreign journalists.

Amid the changing cast of Sabah politics, an uppermost question in the minds of many is whether the absence of an absolute majority will again produce crossovers or even a coalition.

The winner can still appoint six nominated Assemblymen which can alter the balance but not significantly if the margin of victory is too small.

Besides dictating the form of the next State Government, this election - held at a time of economic crisis but waged without raising the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim issue - will have far-reaching consequences on political parties and their cast.

A resounding victory for the winner, for instance, is sure to inflict deep wounds on the losers as the fate of the smaller parties and Sabah-based politicians is dependent on this election.

It is clear that mounting another comeback will be an arduous task for Datuk Harris Salleh, the former Chief Minister, who is now 68, if his Parti Bersekutu fails.

Even if his party does well, Harris has to overcome another ex-Chief Minister Datuk Yong Teck Lee, 41, in Likas, a predominantly Muslim constituency. Yong won the seat in 1994 with a majority of 2,180 votes. Then there is the question about Yong himself if he is to lose.

At 49, Tan Sri Bernard Dompok who has had four hours of sleep a day for

some time now - says son Carl - has defined his battle in Moyog where he is up against Datuk Clarence Bongkos Malakun as a "do or die" battle. Dompok said he would quit if he loses.

Pairin, Datuk Joseph Kurup (president of a Kadazandusun-Murut party in BN), Datuk Pandikar Amin Mulia (Akar president) and Datuk Chong Kah Kiat (sole BN candidate from his Liberal Democratic Party) will also endure hard times if their parties take a beating.

Related to this, has been the exciting trend of the increased number of predictions which cropped up even from the time that not a single ballot has been cast in this ninth State election which attracted a record 199 candidates.

By yesterday, after some voters in six constituencies had gone to the polls, there had been more projections.

Even as numbers flew about, it is the voters who decide. Most of them will only cast their votes today.

(END)