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Party hopping a big issue as campaigning picks up pace

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BEAUFORT, Wed. - Signs of increased political activity abound in this town where new structures blend with charming old two-storey wooden shophouses.

A huge billboard carrying the Hari Raya message from the incumbent wakil rakyat Datuk Lajim Okin occupies a vantage point at its main roundabout.

Lajim is one of the 21 Assemblymen being specially targeted by Parti Bersatu Sabah for leaving the party after the Feb 1994 State election.

Along with the recurring issue of State rights, this "party hopping" matter has leapt to the fore ahead of the March 12-13 polls with Prime Minister and Barisan Nasional chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad interpreting this as PBS' "politics of revenge".

Lajim happened to be the first to cross over to BN in the 1994 episode, precipitating the collapse of the PBS Government.

"When I joined BN, Pairin (PBS president Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan), had wanted to dissolve the State Legislative Assembly again," recalled Lajim when met at the Beaufort rest house yesterday.

Asked if he felt threatened now, Lajim smiled, saying: "I have been working on the ground for the past five years."

He said he also thought that the PBS strategy was "senseless" as the BN had brought much development and had been accepted by the people.

Supporters of Lajim said a dry run involving a house-to-house survey gave BN a 3,000-vote majority.

While PBS stepped up the pressure against the 21 Assemblymen with Pairin saying on Tuesday that defeating them would be "democratic revenge", analysts felt that besides the BN factor, individual support for those politicians would play an important role in determining the outcome of the polls.

Personal loyalty, many here said, happens to be in Lajim's favour. Said a vegetable seller: "We are turning the ground floor of our house as an operations room for Lajim."

Datuk Wences Anggang from the neighbouring constituency of Kuala Penyu, too, is a member of this "Group of 21", and he spoke of how the mood on the ground was initially "very emotional".

Wences describes the Kuala Penyu seat as attainable for BN. "The people have come to realise the beauty of BN," he said.

A 70km road from Beaufort to Menumbok in Wences' coastal constituency is one of the signs of good things brought about by the BN Government.

"It costs RM180 million and will be completed by the middle of next year," he said. Comprehensive power supply is another, he added.

Wences said a strong BN would also help change the political landscape of Sabah, among others, by way of stopping the practice of party hopping "because the BN is represented by all the communities".

Responding for the PBS, its deputy president Dr Maximus Ongkili said supporters of PBS were still angry over the spate of defections in 1994.

"It is because the people obviously feel betrayed," he said.

As a precaution, PBS will now require its candidates to sign an agreement.

A Parti Bersekutu statement said PBS could not expect the people to trust it if the party itself harboured suspicions against its own candidates.

Also reacting to the PBS yesterday was Sabah Umno chief Datuk Osu Sukam who said that while the BN had done its best for the people, PBS would

always have something to say.

But a familiar figure, Election Commission chairman Datuk Harun Din, declined to respond to another of PBS's request (for international observers) when he checked into Kota Kinabalu yesterday to oversee proceedings.

At the Kota Kinabalu International Airport, Harun said he would give a Press conference tomorrow.

Meanwhile, president of the Liberal Democratic Party, Datuk Chong Kah Kiat, a Federal Minister, is arriving today amid intense speculation that he is to contest in Kudat.

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