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People preparing for ultimate decision in their own way

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TO the unfamiliar observer of Sabah politics, obtaining an accurate reading of the current mood on the ground is an extremely difficult task, even with polling a little more than a week away.

It would, at first, confuse and frustrate all except the initiated and experienced.

Houses and buildings in Kota Kinabalu sport both BN and opposition flags and banners, making even more difficult any superficial judgment of where the people's political support lie.

But to those who have not had the good fortune of grasping an understanding of "The Big Picture", there is, fortunately, a `checklist' which facilitates the newcomer's assessment of Sabah's political mood.

Top on the list is a political phenomenon known by locals as `frogs' - candidates who jump back and forth between one opposing political party and another, casting doubt on the veracity of their candidacy.

An example is the little-known Kadazandusun-based opposition party, which originally intended to contest 20 seats.

On the evening before nomination, Pasok decided to pull out and support the BN, especially incumbent Moyog PDS candidate and Chief Minister Tan Sri Bernard Dompok.

The next morning, however, a Pasok candidate was fielded against Dompok. An objection was made against him as he was said to be a registered Umno member, but it failed.

The point was not lost on the PBS supporters at the nomination centre: they made loud noises which eerily resembled a frog's mating call. They directed it squarely on the BN supporters, whom, as the jeers indicated, had been taken for a ride.

The next item on this checklist - very little of what applies in the peninsula is relevant in Sabah, especially when it comes to politics.

"I support the BN, said Norhalimah Gosukin, a housewife from the Kionsom Tengah village, 20km from the State capital. The village is situated in the Inanam constituency.

Norhalimah's five children study at a nearby school and the development of opportunities and infrastructure led her and her fellow Dusuns to support the BN candidate, Datuk Christine Van Houten, a Kadazandusun.

When asked what she expected from her candidate, Norhalimah said she hoped the nearby hospital, about seven metres from her house, would be upgraded.

She then pointed to a house across the road on which the rival Kadazandusun PBS party banner was flying high.

"The Kadazandusuns here are split," she said, revealing her main reason for supporting the BN - the hope that BN's multi-party, multi-ethnic coalition concept would continue to unite the Kadazandusuns, who make up the largest ethnic group in Sabah.

(There are now 600,000 Kadazandusuns among the State's 2.1 million people.)

Third on the checklist for beginners is that this election is witnessing another concept being put to test - whether the people would continue accepting the BN concept, overriding long-standing tribal and ethnic loyalties.

This is the case in the Likas seat, where a redrawing of the traditionally Chinese constituency has resulted in a Malay majority which

the Chinese-based Sabah Progressive Party candidate and former Chief Minister Datuk Yong Teck Lee is defending against Bersekutu's Datuk Harris Salleh.

Much has been written about the significance of the Likas contest and the reading of Bersekutu's and other opposition parties' chances in the State reveal the last but ultimate item on this checklist: the importance of securing a large majority to create a strong and stable State Government.

"I hope we would make the right decision," says Norhalimah, the Kionsom village housewife.

The drive back from her village was quiet as the main posters and banners were only beginning to be strung up.

In due time the banners and posters would scream for attention, but meanwhile, one would still be able to glimpse everyday folk contemplating their little decisions.

Like the schoolboy waiting for his bus, staring in awe at a BN poster of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Or the woman looking into the window of a Muslim Youth Co-op store at the inviting offers inside.

All are preparing for the ultimate decision in their own way in this period of calm before the storm of campaigning finally grips the State.

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