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Politicians consolidating support for Friday's polls

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is also BN chairman, visits Sabah for the second time in two weeks today.

He will make a campaign swing into the Kudat and Ranau areas to reinforce the Barisan Nasional (BN) candidates before campaigning officially close on the eve on polling today.

Dr Mahathir comes to Sabah with more confidence than ever before of a BN win in the ninth Sabah state election - a noteworthy achievement given the state's capricious political situation - compared with the last 1994 election.

Dr Mahathir's confidence is being shared by other BN leaders in Sabah, and is secretly shared even by the opposition.

While officials of Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), the main opposition to BN, publicly say that they are confident of winning the election, either with a simple majority or the much more desirable 32 seat majority, the fact is that the numbers on the ground point to an uphill struggle.

Even in the 1994 election when BN was trying to win in a hostile environment, PBS only pipped it at the post with a narrow 25 to 23 win. But under a new delineation exercise by the Election Commission it would be hard for PBS to even match that win.

There are three main parties contesting in the ninth Sabah election - BN, PBS and Parti Barisan Rakyat Sabah Bersekutu.

Under the re-delineation exercise, 27 of these constituencies are now Muslim-majority areas, 13 Kadazandusuns, seven Chinese and one mixed. Under this situation, the main opposition party, the PBS has its work cut out to forming the next government.

For a simple majority, the PBS will need to win all 13 Kadazandusun seats and all seven Chinese majority seats, one mixed seat and at least four Muslim majority constituency.

However, there is only an outside chance of the PBS winning the Chinese-dominated seats because a substantial minority in these areas are Muslim voters and in 1994 it only managed four out of eight Chinese majority seats.

PBS is hobbled with seemingly inappropriate candidates standing in the seven Chinese majority areas.

Though PBS members are baffled by the choice, it is more likely that Pairin's judgment has been coloured heavily by his fear of assemblymen jumping ship in the event of a narrow margin in the election.

"Pairin may be looking for candidates that he can count on to stay, and overriding whether they are most suitable or not," said a local PBS man. That fear is well-founded in Sabah where it is common for politicians to change parties.

That was illustrated vividly when there was a state-wide rumour that PBS was about to see its first party-hopping "frog" candidate even before the polls at Kalabakan where BN candidate Ghapur Salleh is being challenged by his brother.

However, PBS candidate for Kalabakan, Hamud Salleh, denied that he was about to quit and vowed to go all out to ensure that Kalabakan falls to PBS.

Hamud's denial is important because people still remember in 1994 when he also stood against his brother, that time under the Setia ticket, but withdrew at the last minute.

The state remains restless because an expected spate of withdrawals by candidates, a common occurrence previously, has yet to materialise. Meanwhile, two days to polling, politicians of all parties are not out to win converts but are concentrating on consolidating support for Friday's polls.

Dr Mahathir went to Penampang district, in which the Moyog constituency lies.

Moyog is where incumbent Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, the Chief Minister of the State, is facing challenge from five others that include PBS candidate Bongkos Malakun.

Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan was in Kota Kinabalu wooing support in the Chinese-dominated area in Luyang while complaining that the BN is about to bring in 40,000 phantom votes.

While Bersekutu has no practical chance of winning many of the 48 seats it is contesting, the presence of its candidates is worrying both the BN and PBS.

While BN leaders say they are worried that Bersekutu candidates will water down support for the party in the Muslim-majority areas the PBS MP for Api Api hoped that voters in crucial areas would stay away from Bersekutu candidates.

The presence of BN leaders from the other side of the South China Sea has been used by its opponents PBS and Bersekutu to fuel anti-Federal sentiments but that has not stopped Dr Mahathir, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and virtually the whole Cabinet to come over to reassure the Sabah people that BN rule would continue to be good for Sabah.

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