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Record 199 candidates vying for 48 seats (HL)

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KOTA KINABALU, Tues. - A record 199 candidates will be vying for the 48 seats in next week's Sabah election with Barisan Nasional, Parti Bersatu Sabah and Parti Bersekutu contesting in all constituencies as expected.

While the 1994 polls attracted 153 candidates, nomination which closed at 12.30pm, produced a bigger line-up of aspirants who paid a total of RM597,000 in deposits.

Some 27 Independents, against 32 previously, joined the fray along with 21 from Parti Setia while Pas fielded candidates in six constituencies after saying it would contest in 12.

Pasok, whose president Peter Oyong Lobinjang told State BN chairman Tan Sri Bernard Dompok yesterday it is not fielding anyone and would instead back the BN, is in the picture after all.

Apparently, the sole Pasok candidate, Cletus Sipain Mojinggol, is from a different faction.

Despite the intensity of the battle with boisterous supporters turning out at the 27 nomination centres, Election Commission chairman Datuk Harun Din told a Press conference the entire process went on smoothly without any untoward incident.

Signifying the intensity of the fight which brought out a sea of posters and buntings belonging to BN, PBS and Bersekutu, seven aspirants are eyeing Labuk, a constituency in Sandakan, alone.

Harun said the eighth candidate in Labuk had his papers rejected. The aspirant from Pas, Haris Hajail, arrived late to file his nomination papers, and sent in an incomplete application.

Apart from the seven-cornered fight for the Labuk seat, there will be between three and six candidates contesting seats in the other constituencies.

Another aspirant in Tandek was unable to contest after failing to come up with enough money for the deposit.

The fight for Likas, pitting former Chief Ministers Datuk Yong Teck Lee against Datuk Harris Salleh (Chief Minister from 1976-85), has attracted four other candidates.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi visited the nomination centre where Yong filed his papers.

He also visited the nomination centres involving Dompok (Moyog) and State Umno chief Datuk Osu Sukam, who is involved in a five-cornered fight in Kawang.

Dompok, 49, too, is involved in a six-cornered fight in Moyog where Datuk Clarence Bongkos Malakun of PBS is trying to unseat him for the second time after failing to do as an Independent in 1994. Then, Dompok contested under the PBS ticket.

PBS president Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan, 58, is being challenged by three others including Petrus Francis Guriting of the BN.

Even as the nomination centres opened at 9am, political developments unfolded with veteran Datuk Yahya Lampong, who joined Parti Bersekutu yesterday, back in Umno today.

Yahya told a Press conference he now realised he was caught in the "dirty political game" of his enemies.

"Unwittingly I followed their tune but after being made aware by Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (the Deputy Prime Minister met Yahya) I realised my services in Umno are still needed and appreciated by the

leadership."

Yahya was yesterday named as Bersekutu's candidate for the coastal constituency of Kuala Penyu.

Harris of Bersekutu, who had welcomed Yahya yesterday, said the about-turn by his associate during their Berjaya days was a blessing in disguise.

"Yesterday he hentam (lambasted), the Federal Government and Dr Mahathir (Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad), it would be interesting to listen to what he has to say now," said Harris after filing his nomination papers at the Kota Kinabalu Community Hall.