

26 NOV 1999

Election-Kapit (News Focus)

SLEEPY KAPIT WAKES UP TO ELECTION THRILLS

By: Edward Stephen

KAPIT, Nov 26 (Bernama) -- Since nomination day, a few hundred people make their way daily to a room on the first floor of a four-storey rented shoplot here.

They come for a variety of reasons but most commonly to collect chits to exchange for petrol at appointed river kiosks.

Such is the scene at the Barisan Nasional (BN) operations rooms for parliamentary constituency of Kapit, the sleepy hollow along the Rejang River, Malaysia's longest river at about 350 km, and its main means of communication.

They are election workers and fuel accounts for the bulk of expenses to reach out to voters in more than 300 longhouses deep in the interior.

The Kapit constituency is seeing a three-cornered tussle between BN's Alexander Nanta Linggi, Keadilan's Beginda Minda alias Nor Azaman Abdullah and independent candidate Richard Nujong Abit.

The 22,020-voter constituency, mostly comprising of Ibans, has been a BN stronghold. In the last election, three-term incumbent James Jimbun Pungga won by a 2,379-vote majority over independent Lau Ung Hai.

This time around, the BN, with an obvious edge over rival candidates in terms of election machinery, is putting up a candidate with impressive credentials. Nanta Alexander, 41, better known as Alex, is a political secretary to the Sarawak Chief Minister.

His family background is even more impressive. He is the grandson of the legendary late Tun Jugah anak Barieng, once the paramount chief of the Ibans, and Federal Minister of Sarawak Affairs under Malaysia's first and second prime ministers.

His father is Datuk Amar Leonard Linggi Jugah, a state cabinet member in the 70's and now a businessman, besides being the State BN secretary.

Alex is well-educated and most importantly his candidacy, in the words of Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud at a recent gathering in Song, "is fully endorsed by the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad".

Being a BN candidate, he is synonymous with "projek pemansang" (Iban for development projects). Since being appointed political secretary about three years ago, Alex has been travelling the length and breadth of the area apparently in preparation for a greater task ahead.

Of his two opponents, observers agree that Beginda, 39, a businessman, has the more bite.

He is best known for being one of the witnesses in the recent corruption trial of sacked Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in Kuala Lumpur.

Beginda quit the Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS), a BN member, to join Keadilan and was a key aide to PBDS Assemblyman and incumbent MP Datuk Sng Chee Hua.

Baginda's battlecry is for the people to give Keadilan a chance to form the next government under the coalition front, Barisan Alternatif.

He said if the opposition wins the election, more land development projects would be implemented to discourage Iban youths from "berjalai" (leaving their own towns in search of jobs elsewhere.)

On the other hand, Richard, 42, a former teacher chose to harp on more localised albeit petty and personal issues. He is banking on his relatives and friends to win the seat.

Taib at a meet-the-people session in support of the BN candidate,

promised projects worth some RM25 million for the district, including several new roads.

Taib's message is clear -- Support the BN for continued development and progress.

Shopkeeper Pua Boon Seng, 65, feels that with such projects local youths will perhaps be persuaded to stay put instead of seeking for employment elsewhere.

According to him, many people from this district are working in oil companies as far as Norway, Saudi Arabia, Britain and others.

" The people here are also very enthusiastic about having a road which can link the town to Song and ultimately Sibuh" he added.

-- BERNAMA

ESS AU