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Sabah-Election (news analysis)  
SPECULATION ENDS, SABAH GOES TO POLLS AGAIN

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KOTA KINABALU, Feb 22 (Bernama) -- Incessant speculations since last year on the state election came to an end today, with Sabah at the doorstep of yet another crucial election in what is seen as a prelude to the general election which must be held next year.

The election heat gained steam abruptly with today's announcement of the state assembly's dissolution by Chief Minister Tan Sri Bernard Dompok.

With this, Sabah's political arena, which never saw a dull moment in its history, is opened to political parties to launch their campaigns to win the hearts and minds of the more than 726,000 voters.

The Election Commission will announce the nomination and polling dates tomorrow but political circles here have speculated March 12 and 13 as the most likely dates for polling.

The stage has been set for the same if not a more "dramatic" election as compared to the previous polls in this state which has seen more changes of government than other states.

As a comparison, its neighbour Sarawak has had only four chief ministers since its independence in 1963 but Sabah had seen 10 in the same period.

Though the dissolution was announced only today, the election fever had been long felt with political parties gearing up with early preparations for the 48 seats up for grabs.

What makes the Sabah election tick is its sheer unpredictability with past records showing even parties that had been just formed toppling the more established ones.

Not to mention the dramatic events that followed in previous elections, the like of which only Sabah could provide the stage.

And the stage is set for political parties, having drawn their battle lines months ahead of the dissolution, to settle old scores especially with events following the previous 1994 polls still quite fresh in the minds of voters.

In a dramatic twist of events, the Kadazandusun-based Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) that had then ruled the state for nine years and which scraped through a bitterly-fought election with a one-seat majority, was toppled when most of its elected assemblymen crossed over to the Barisan Nasional (BN) component parties.

Although as usual a good mix of BN parties, PBS, the newly-revived Parti Bersekutu and some "mosquito" entities are joining the fray, the 1999 election is all but certain to be the battle ground between the BN and PBS with Bersekutu reportedly coming from behind to give the big two a run for their money.

Bersekutu, now headed by former Chief Minister Datuk Harris Salleh, who at 68 is making perhaps his last determined bid for a political comeback, is hoping for a "third-time lucky" syndrome.

In 1976, it was Harris, then leading his barely one-year-old Parti Berjaya, that toppled the Usno-led government of nine years.

History was repeated in a even more dramatic fashion nine years later when the Harris government was swept aside by PBS, which was set up by its president Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan only three weeks earlier.

On paper, the BN holds a distinct edge over its rivals and this time, the ruling coalition is going to the people with a proud track record of having created political stability through strong federal-state ties, an

essential recipe for economic prosperity of this state of about two million people.

Predicting the outcome of the coming polls is bound to be intense not only in Sabah but perhaps nation-wide, including reportedly among punters and betting syndicates.

But it is going to be more than a mathematical exercise, against the backdrop that BN, PBS and Bersekutu have all expressed confidence of winning by a two-third majority.

Curiously, Sabah has seen quite frequent landslides lately along its highways, cutting off for days vital road communication between towns and rural settlements.

The big question now at this quite early stage of the drama is which party among the BN, PBS and perhaps Bersekutu is heading for a landslide victory, if any.

Tan Sri Peter Lo, Sabah's first Chinese Chief Minister way back in the mid-1960's, had said that for the BN, there was little doubt that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, could prove to be the winning card, "when all the chips are down".

And Dr Mahathir himself is more than bullish.

" There is no question about it, we are going to win," he said here over the weekend.

-- BERNAMA

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