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Tempo of campaign speeding up

Rashid Yusof in Kota Kinabalu

THE weather yesterday at the fog-covered Gunung Emas Resort (altitude: 6,000ft) dipped below 15 Celsius, a stark contrast to the political temperature in Sabah with campaigning reaching feverish pitch.

This highland straddles the border between the Moyog and Tambunan constituencies, two of the 48 seats being keenly contested in an election which has already stirred some drama and about-turns.

Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, the Chief Minister and State BN chairman, is involved in a major contest in defending Moyog, while Tambunan has been the seat of power of Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan since 1976.

"It is time to end politics with racial connotations. It is outdated," said Dompok in Penampang yesterday.

Like Dompok, all over Sabah, politicians were yesterday hitting the campaign trail with Kota Kinabalu and other major towns draped in posters.

With the candidates very much confirmed after a few spectacular developments in the last minute, streets were festooned with newly printed posters of candidates.

A particularly prominent billboard outside the Parti Bersekutu head office in Kota Kinabalu proclaimed: "Kerajaan Baru. Kerajaan Bersekutu" accompanied by a picture of Datuk Harris Salleh.

Harris went campaigning in Lahad Datu yesterday, where Bersekutu's candidate Abdillah Abdul Hamid, who left Umno on Monday, is facing, among others, BN's Shamsu Baharom Abdul Rahman.

BN, PBS and Parti Bersekutu are fielding candidates in all the constituencies.

All over Sabah, in the numerous operations rooms, sums will feature prominently from now as strategists go over figures on the number of fence sitters and how the respective communities will vote.

But more importantly, much of their energies and mind games will be channelled into the battle where it really matters - on the ground. Which means for the next nine days, many of the 199 candidates will be holed up in their constituencies taking every opportunity to talk to voters.

Infrastructure like roads and electricity will feature prominently in this election.

"BN will bring more infrastructure," said Datuk Ghafur Salleh, the BN candidate facing his younger brother, Hamud, in Kalabakan.

"I just got back from house-to-house canvassing," said Datuk Chong Kah Kiat, president of the Liberal Democratic Party, when contacted in Kudat where he is locked in a major battle with his one-time No 2, Datuk Kong Hong Ming.

Datuk Chau Tet On (BN candidate in Api-Api) by comparison has a much easier task than many others. His constituency covers the heart of Kota Kinabalu, and yesterday he hopped from one business premise to another.

His team members, including supporters in the navy blue BN hats, were negotiating the busy streets of Kota Kinabalu at a leisurely pace. A short distance from a coffee shop Chau went to yesterday, was a small counter belonging to Parti Bersekutu.

Chau is the sole MCA candidate contesting under the BN ticket.

Many others will have to comb an expanse of sparsely populated areas taking them through roads that cut across a landscape of rolling hills and winding rivers.

Pairin in Tambunan would have been one of those with difficult terrain

to conquer, but when a group of reporters visited his constituency yesterday the president of Parti Bersatu Sabah was not in town. He was leading the PBS campaign in Tawau.

At a T-junction leading to Tambunan and Ranau, supporters of Pairin were putting up a banner that says: "PBS fights for all."

In places like Ranau and Kundasang, which has a marvellous view of Mount Kinabalu, the poster war is just picking up. But various, unfavourable interpretations of what PBS stands for were displayed.

One said PBS meant Pembelot Bangsa Sendiri (loosely translated: Traitor of its own community).

Despite the presence of other candidates, Ranau in the heart of Sabah's interior, will see a fight between two information chiefs - Siringan Gubat of Parti Demokratik Sabah and Henrynus Amin of PBS.

Yesterday, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi again made a dash to Kota Kinabalu and today, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is arriving for a three-day visit.

Dr Mahathir will be meeting the people at Dewan Menggatal in Kota Kinabalu tonight.

During his stay, Dr Mahathir will speak at gatherings held in the constituency of Likas where Datuk Yong Teck Lee, leader of the Sabah Progressive Party, is being challenged by Harris Salleh and also in Moyog.

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