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Why voters should pick parties over sentiments for candidates

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FOREIGN journalists began checking yesterday into a Kota Kinabalu pregnant with election fever and frenzied predictions, not to mention bettings, on how the competing parties will finish.

"I have come up with my projected tally of seats won by the parties," said an excitable thirty-something voter from her family home in the heart of Moyog.

In the meantime, some people, perhaps anticipating a close finish like the 25 seats for Parti Bersatu Sabah and 23 for Barisan Nasional in 1994, has added a new bizarre twist - spreading a rumour on the Internet that the Yang di-Pertua Negeri is going on leave from Sunday, the day after polling.

The intention is clear: to suggest that the winner of the Friday-Saturday polls cannot be sworn in, thus a repeat of the 1994 incident when Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan was at the gates of the Istana for 36 hours waiting to be sworn in.

While this piece of rumour has been unable to stir much enthusiasm, the front runners in this election are working feverishly to avoid a "hung" Assembly and thus ensure a more stable political situation in Sabah.

According to a political party's assessment, 27 of the 48 seats are Muslim-majority, 13 (Kadazandusun/Murut), and 7 (Chinese).

And, yesterday, major Sabah politicians plunged deeper into the campaign trail: Tan Sri Bernard Dompok in Sandakan; Pairin in Tamparuli; and Datuk Harris Salleh of Parti Bersekutu in Pairin's seat of Tambunan.

Amid the rush to the finishing line much weightage is being given to voter's "feelings" in deciding the final tally.

"PBS won 25 seats in 1994 and eight parliamentary seats a year later when sentiments were still strong," observed Dompok.

He now sees changes in Sabah politics. "Everywhere I go, residents will stress the need for more development," said Dompok, who believes that coupled with the enlarged BN incorporating the Kadazandusuns this time, the BN is poised to win more than the 23 seats it secured in 1994.

"Then, the BN only had the support of the Muslims and the Chinese," said Dompok, the Chief Minister.

As the enlarged BN seeks a mandate from the people of Sabah, a sore point has been the sentiments among those who voted for the 21 PBS Assemblymen who left the party in the wake of the virtually inconclusive 1994 polls.

Said an accountant and general manager of a local firm, who declared to be an admirer of the economic management of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad:

"Many Sabah voters feel let down by the spate of defections. Now we don't know whether our vote is appreciated."

Related to this is the onslaught by the PBS to defeat the 21 who left the party in the wake of the 1994 polls, which was why Pairin was in Tamparuli yesterday.

(Datuk Wilfred Bumburing, the BN candidate in Tamparuli, won the seat in 1994 under the ticket of PBS. He was the PBS Youth head then).

To Alies Anor, political secretary to the Education Minister, it is human nature for voters to yearn for recognition and for their votes to be appreciated.

But he feels the question of sentiments which had forcefully coloured

Sabah politics in the past, is waning.

To even the most simplistic voters, a recurring concern is "progress, jobs and material development," said Alies who saw in this a little progress in the political thinking.

Even, the likes of the accountant who was advocating for an article on "What Your Vote Means" to be written ahead of polling on Friday and Saturday, acknowledged BN's capacity to bring in development.

In fact, he believed only BN has come up with a credible economic plan in its manifesto, yet he remains disconcerted.

"I am going to listen to all the candidates in my constituency and ask them "Are you going to jump after the election?," he said dramatically.

Here lies another compelling determinant in Sabah politics - a trend among sections of the electorate to go for the candidates and not the party.

The question of candidates is said to be rooted on one's feelings ranging from impressions, nostalgia to personal interests.

This is an area BN campaigners are eager to alter.

"The submission in this election," said Alies Anor borrowing a legal term, "is voters should go for the party."

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