

21/03/2001

Gawai celebrations may be the election inspiration Taib is waiting for

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ELECTION fever has Sarawak tightly in its grip.

Many are expecting the State's eighth election to be called within the next two months, even though the current 62-member Legislative Assembly's five-year term will only expire in November.

In fact, political parties began campaigning in the middle of last year, as they were expecting the State Barisan Nasional Government to call for a fresh mandate by end of 2000.

When State BN head and Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud said he had yet to get the inspiration to go to the polls, focus was switched to early 2001.

It is now middle of March and most people believe that the State elections would be held before the annual Dayak's Gawai (Harvest) celebrations.

"Gawai will be merrier this year if the election is held within the next two months," said a veteran Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS) leader.

He reckons that apart from the traditional festival, Gawai this time around will be a time to celebrate another landslide victory by the BN's four component parties in Sarawak.

Apart from PBDS, the other members of the State coalition Government are Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Sarawak United People Party (SUPP) and Sarawak National Action Party (SNAP).

They are confident of a repeat of their Sept 6-7, 1996, victory, where BN won 57 seats while DAP obtained only three. The remaining two went to Independent candidates.

One of the DAP's seats was later declared null and void by the High Court and it was later won by BN in a by-election. Furthermore, one of the DAP Assemblymen had since left the party.

The seats composition of the Assembly now are PBB (29), SUPP (14), PBDS (eight), SNAP (seven), Independent (three) and DAP (one).

PBB is headed by Taib who on March 26 will celebrate his 20th-year as Chief Minister of Sarawak. On the same day, PBB will turn 40. He is expected to give at least a hint of when the election will be held.

Taib is the Assemblyman for Asajaya, one of the State seats within the Semarahan parliamentary constituency of which he is also the MP. He won Asajaya uncontested in the last election.

SUPP, headed by Deputy Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr George Chan says preparation for the election is in the final stage, including the party's list of candidates.

"SUPP will be defending its 14 seats and is also poised to wrest back the three that went to the opposition in the last election," Chan told the Press recently.

SNAP, whose president is State Environment and Public Health Minister Datuk James Wong, is just waiting for the polls. Their election centres are in place.

Wong, like many others, believes that it is time for the election.

"I do not know when the election will be held but I have a feeling that it will be some time before May ... that is two more months!" he said.

Wong, who has represented Limbang since 1954, will not be contesting in the coming election. He has decided that it is now time for a rest.

PBDS president Datuk Leo Moggie is confident that his party will be able to defend all the eight seats it won in the last election. The party is

also confident of victory if given additional seats to contest in the coming election.

Joining the fray in the coming election will be local Sarawak-based State Reform Party (Star) headed by Dr Patau Lubis, a former SNAP stalwart.

Meanwhile, the Opposition will be represented by Peninsular Malaysia-based DAP, Keadilan and also Pas.

These opposition parties have been visiting constituencies where they are expected to field candidates.

National BN chairman and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who was in Kuching last month said Sarawak was ready for the election.

BN national secretary-general Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat had also said that it was time to face the people for a new mandate.

All these have brought about an election fever in this "Land of the Hornbills".

The Election Commission has been on stand-by since last year and the police, too, are ready.

Chairman of the Commission Tan Sri Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman has said they are ready to conduct the election.

The Commission has since last year identified those who will be appointed returning officers while courses for supporting staff have also been conducted.

Sarawak State Secretary Datuk Abdul Aziz Hussain added that all State government departments were ready for the election with all would-be returning officers asked to stay put in their respective posts.

Department heads at divisional and district levels have also been instructed to freeze transfer of their officers until the election is over. Leave will also be frozen when the State Assembly is dissolved.

Usually district officers and heads of department are appointed returning officers by the Commission during State elections.

Supporting staff are also appointed from district offices in each of the 62 constituencies.