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Longhouse residents furious with Pas

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"Enti nuan ari Pas kami endak ngemendar nuan masuk!" (If you are from Pas we will not allow you to enter). An Iban Tuai Rumah (longhouse chief) had this to say to a Borneo Post reporter in Sadong Jaya on Saturday.

Sadong Jaya, a Muslim-dominated constituency, is one of the three seats eyed by Pas in tomorrow's Sarawak polls.

Apparently Pas, a peninsula-based party making its debut in Sarawak, has got off on the wrong footing. Its campaigners have been banned from longhouses in Sadong Jaya for bringing its aggressive campaign tactics to Sarawak.

The longhouse residents are furious with Pas supporters because they had called the Sarawak Malays kafir (infidels) on nomination day when Barisan Nasional and Pas members engaged in an heated exchange of words at the nomination centre in Sadong Jaya.

Pas is also contesting two other seats - Beting Maro and Samariang - in the election where most of the 868,487 voters will cast their ballots to elect the remaining 58 representatives to the 62-member State legislative assembly. Four seats have already been won uncontested by the BN.

Pas and Parti Keadilan Nasional are known for their gung-ho politics. Their members had even instilled fear among BN voters and kept them away from balloting centres during the Nov 29 Lunas by-election where Keadilan's Saifuddin Nasution won with a narrow majority of 530.

"We are sad that these two parties have brought along with them their violent culture which they propagates in the peninsula," Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said during his one-day campaign trail for the BN last night.

Like in the past seven elections, the Sarawak BN looks set to be returned to power with a two-thirds majority.

But this election sees many firsts. It is the first time Pas, Keadilan and the State Reform Party are contesting the State election.

The number of Independents contesting the election is also unprecedented. Some 63 Independent candidates, most of whom are said to be aligned to the former Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu deputy chief Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha, are seeking election.

Some quarters claim that the group led by Abang Abu Bakar was being backed by Umno, although the party has categorically denied it.

Some political observers argue that it will be an uphill task for Pas, DAP and Keadilan to secure seats in the election.

This is especially so because the marriage of convenience between DAP and Pas came to an abrupt end on Sunday when the former decided to leave the opposition coalition in a bitter disagreement over the Islamic state issue.

Although Keadilan's election director Azmin Ali claims that DAP's decision to leave the party will have little impact on Keadilan in the State election, the move by its 3,000 members in Miri to leave the party (Keadilan) for the BN, was reflective of their utter disappointment.

Keadilan is contesting 25 seats while Pas three. The DAP is trying its luck in 13 constituencies.

With DAP leaving the coalition, there will certainly be a split among DAP, Pas and Keadilan supporters. DAP will be challenged by Keadilan in Tanjung Datu and Pending while Pas and Keadilan will take each other on in Samariang.

But while some politicians see the DAP-Pas split as a disaster for the two, others see it as a ploy to garner sympathy votes in tomorrow's election.

"This is only wayang kulit. They (DAP) will join the coalition again," said SUPP president Tan Sri Dr George Chan who added that this was DAP's tactics to fish for sympathy votes.

Information Minister Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob shares the same view.

He said the people of Sarawak should be wary of DAP's tactics as the party could have an hidden agenda.

Indeed, the timing of DAP's announcement - just five days before the Sarawak election - is rather questionable.

Although in past elections, the BN had had won comfortably, it is not resting on its laurels.

BN leaders and party workers have been on the ground since nominations day to gain more support, realising that the Opposition is also not short of political heavyweights contesting the election.

The BN will face some competition from DAP in constituencies like Bukit Assek where incumbent DAP candidate Wong Ho Leng is seeking re-election.

Pelawan, Kidurong, Padungan and Bawang Assan will be the other constituencies where the DAP is expected to fare well. In all four, the BN will take on DAP in a straight fight.

Keadilan would put up a strong challenge in Pantai Damai, Demak Laut, Tupong, Samariang, Simunjan, Belaga and Marudi.

Bujang Ulis, former Deputy Education Minister and a good orator, is contesting the Simunjan seat as a Keadilan candidate. He is expected to fare well.

Keadilan candidates Abin Bira and Harrison Ngau, both known environmentalists, are contesting the Belaga and Marudi seats, respectively.

Ngau is reputed for defeating Datuk Luhah Wan, then a deputy minister, for the Baram parliamentary seat in the 1990 general election.

Ngau had then stood as an Independent candidate.

Bukit Begunan has been a controversial constituency. Although many wanted Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak deputy president Datuk Daniel Tajem to be fielded, the BN had instead chosen incumbent Mong anak Dagang.

This, observers say, had upset Tajem's supporters and the outcome of the election could be affected.

The successes of Independent candidates in the Sarawak elections like those achieved by Yii Chu Lik (Meradong) and Keding Wan (Telang Usang) in 1996 show that personality is a factor which determines the outcome of the election.

As such, Abang Abu Bakar who is contesting in Asajaya, Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud's former constituency, will also be a man to watch.

In Bengoh, State Reform Party president Patau Rubis is expected to put up a strong challenge against BN's Belek Anak Susil. Patau himself is not a stranger to Sarawak politics. He was formerly MP for Mas Gading after winning the seat on a Sarawak National Party (SNAP).

All in all, political observers say, the Opposition can win about 10 seats compared to five in 1996.

Sarawak is the only State in the country where Umno is not represented. But political observers believe that if Pas and Keadilan should win some of the seats, Umno will be forced to make its presence in Sarawak.

They feel that if Pas and Keadilan, both peninsula-based parties, make inroads in Sarawak, only Umno, Malaysia's political powerhouse, will be able to fight them off.

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