

Different mood this time around

STAR - 8 JUL 2002

News commentary by
JOCELINE TAN

IT WAS only a three-hour stopover in Langkawi for the executive jet entourage en route from Bangkok back to Kuala Lumpur but when Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad stepped off the plane yesterday, he found a large crowd waiting and waving on the tarmac.

Life for the Prime Minister has taken on a nostalgic, even poignant, turn since he announced his retirement plans. Almost everywhere he has been, he has been greeted, even mobbed by people, with many of them emotional about his pending retreat from the pinnacle.

Some joke that among the crowd in the PM's visits home to Kedah have been the Umno hopefuls for the by-elections in Anak Bukit and Pendang.

But those in the Barisan

Nasional political loop say the lobbying is over, the choice decided and that their names will likely be made known soon.

The PAS side has also decided on their men and will announce the names on Tuesday evening.

Nomination takes place on Wednesday and polling on July 18 and the eight days in between will see what many expect to be one of the most intense battles ever for the hearts and minds of the Malays.

It is a contest that both Umno and PAS have been eager for. This will be the golden chance for Umno to prove that its political recovery is no mere propaganda and that it has truly recovered from its disappointing show in the 1999 general election.

For PAS, this is the opportunity to demonstrate their sway over the Malay belt, to test

whether its success in the 1999 polls was more than just a result of public sentiment over the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim issue.

"The mood is very different this time around. We are going to give it our best shot," said Umno Youth information chief Azimi Daim, who hails from Kedah.

But PAS secretary-general Nasharuddin Mat Isa insisted: "We will keep the seats."

The two by-elections, a state seat in Anak Bukit and a parliamentary seat in Pendang, also come in the wake of watersheds in the two rival political parties.

One is the untimely death of the incumbent and PAS president Datuk Fadzil Mohd Noor.

His passing has been a devastating blow to the party. Fadzil was the moderate face of PAS. He was also its political anchor in Kedah and much of the west coast.

Fadzil was also an immensely likeable and popular politician and his death is bound to evoke sympathy votes if the massive crowd who turned up for his funeral is any indication.

But as Johor Mentri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman said: "Emotion or no emotion, the party is going to feel the effect of Fadzil Noor not being there."

The perception is that apart from the Anwar factor, Fadzil also won on his status as a party president.

In that sense, regardless of who the PAS candidates are - and talk is that the party is fielding a couple of young, highly qualified local boys - they do not carry the weight of Fadzil.

Besides, Fadzil only won Pendang in his second attempt despite the constituency's reputation for *pondok* schools and a conservative, farming popu-

lace. In fact, 1999 was the first time that this veteran politician was ushered into Parliament.

In that sense too, Pendang is not the "PAS stronghold" that some have made it out to be. The PAS influence in Kedah has grown steadily over the years but Pendang is still a constituency where both PAS and Umno have strong presence.

The other watershed lies in Umno and it is none other than the stunning announcement by Dr Mahathir that he is ready to call it a day in politics.

The decision has brought forth a resurgence of pro-Dr Mahathir feelings; it has reawakened the sentimental side of many Malays and set them reflecting on this remarkable man's achievements on behalf of their community and the nation.

His retirement plans have also caught the opposition by

surprise and put a number of them on the defensive for the vile things they used to say about him. A segment in the Barisan says that this famous son of Kedah will be a factor in the by-elections.

The other prevailing notion is that both the Barisan and PAS each enjoy a core support of about 35% to 40% among the voters and that the task at hand is to win over the fence-sitters.

Among these fence sitters, according to Deputy Home Minister Datuk Chor Chee Heung, are the non-Malays who make up 12% of the voters in Pendang and 15% in Anak Bukit.

"I think they have made up their minds. They will check the advance of PAS in Kedah."

Much is at stake in these two by-elections. The conduct and outcome of the Pendang and Anak Bukit by-elections will be eagerly watched.