

12 MAR 2004  
Election-Perak (News Focus)  
PERAK IN THE FOCUS OF NATIONAL POLITICS

IPOH, March 12 (Bernama) - Until two weeks ago, Perak was not considered a "hot" state in the March 21 general election. But now it has become one of the main focus in national politics.

With only three parliamentary and eight state seats occupied by the opposition in the last 1999 general election, Perak at first did not promise any tough fights, given the lack of national issues like those five years ago.

However, when the 24 parliamentary and 59 state seats of the state with 1.17 voters are open for nomination tomorrow, Perak will become the focus of the political pundits and observers.

In the fray are five cabinet ministers: Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu (Sungai Siput), Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik (Beruas), Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz (Kuala Kangsar), Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz (Padang Rengas) dan Brig Jen (B) Datuk Seri Abdul Hamid Zainal Abidin (Parit Buntar).

The electoral heat in Perak suddenly went up by a few notches when DAP strongman Lim Kit Siang announced his intention to contest in Ipoh Timor after trying his political fortune in Pulau Pinang several terms with little result.

Suddenly too did the DAP want to make Perak its front-line state after Pulau Pinang and they are eyeing Kinta Valley which offers three parliamentary and nine state seats.

Umno which had long moved its machinery to re-capture the Parit and Parit Buntar seats from PAS, were given a jolt when it had to give up its Bukit Gantang seat to a component party of the Barisan Nasional, the Parti Progresif Penduduk (PPP).

Umno Bukit Gantang strongly opposed the presence of PPP president Datuk M. Kayveas, shutting down their operations room and sending a delegation to see Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Menteri Besar Datuk

Seri Tajol Rosli Ghazali.

The unexpected "development" in a way also affected the Perak BN's aim of having "zero opposition" in the state.

"We were really confident of re-capturing all the seats (held by the opposition) but with the problem of Bukit Gantang and the presence of Lim Kit Siang, we would face some problems but I think its impact would not be major," said Tajol Rosli.

Quick action by the leaders and compromises by the BN allowed the Bukit Gantang issue to be resolved when Gerakan agreed to let Kayveas stand in its Taiping parliamentary constituency while its Perak wanita chief Tan Lian Hoe stand in Bukit Gantang.

Tajol Rosli regarded the opposition by the Bukit Gantang Umno as the "style of Umno" because they were defending their own turf but the power-sharing policy of the BN and the maturity of its leaders succeeded in resolving the issue.

The Bukit Gantang issue arose when the PPP, which last contested in the 1986 election, had problems getting a suitable seat and in the end, the BN leaders left it to the incumbent Menteri Besar to solve the problem.

Perak was the choice of PPP because it was once its stronghold.

"They joined the Alliance when they were still strong. The leaders felt that it is not right to side-track them because they are weak," said Tajol Rosli.

As a solution, the Perak BN looked for a seat with the lowest Malay majority and Bagan Datok was found to be the choice but was not chosen because the incumbent, Datuk Zahid Hamidi, still wanted to contest.

In the end, Bukit Gantang was selected because the incumbent, Datuk Dr Abdullah Fadzil Che Wan, had stated his intention to opt out.

Although the party leaders did not promise any post to the head of the Bukit Gantang division, it is learnt that the head of its pro-term committee, Datuk Mat Isa Ismail, has been selected to be the Speaker of the State assembly if he wins Changkat Jering state seat.

The half-day visit of Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak to the Kerian district this Monday, is expected to cool down the

situation.

For the other seats, Umno is hoping that the choice of candidates based on the local factor would help the party win several seats considered to be PAS strongholds, especially Parit Buntar, Parit and Bagan Serai.

For Parit, Umno chose three candidates for the parliamentary and state seats from the local leaders who are said to be active in the division, including the head of the pro-tem committee Datuk Zaim Abu Hassan (for the Belanja state seat) and Nasaruddin Hashim (parliamentary seat).

Earlier, head of the Ipoh Barat pro-tem committee and chairman of Felcra, Datuk Hamzah Zainuddin, was touted as the best candidate but the Parit Umno insisted on having their own leader, citing the case of former Domestic Trade and Consumers Affairs Minister Tan Sri Megat Junid who lost in Parit in the 1999 general election because of the strong sentiment against an "outsider candidate".

"We gave them what they want. So, the Parit Umno have to work hard to make sure that they win... if not, it would show that Umno itself is not strong in Parit," said Tajol Rosli.

For Parit Buntar, an "outsider" for a candidate should not be a problem for Umno because the incumbent MP, PAS Vice President Datuk Dr Hassan Ali is also an outsider. But religion is the main factor.

Minister in the Prime Minister' Department, Brig Gen (rtf) Datuk Abdul Hamid Zainal Abidin who is in charge of the religious portfolio, is the Umno choice while the Director of the Perak Special Affairs Department, Kapt (rtd) Najmuddin Alias Al-Hafiz, 40, who is also a popular religious speaker, is the Umno candidate for the Batu Kurau state seat.

Another Umno seat that is considered "hot" is Bagan Serai, where Deputy Home Minister Datuk Zainal Abidin Zin will be challenged again by the Perak PAS Commissioner, Ahmad Awang.

While Umno is focusing on the PAS strongholds, the MCA has to deal with Lim Kit Siang in Ipoh Timor where 85.3 percent of the 62,531 voters are

Chinese, the highest number in the country.

Perak MCA chairman Datuk Ong Ka Chuan is determined to displace the DAP incumbent in the Batu Gajah parliamentary seat, Fong Po Kuan, in the party's attempt to check the DAP in the state.

The lack of the issues to arouse the wrath of the people towards the government is not a problem to the DAP which is fishing for sympathy votes, especially by the supporters of Lim Kit Siang who want him to be given the last chance to return to parliament after his failure in Pulau Pinang.

Kit Siang may have changed constituency but his political Nemesis, former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad will always be in his mind.

Dr Mahathir will take to the Ipoh Timor field on March 19 to assist the BN candidate, Thong Fah Chong, in wooing the Chinese voters who hold the former prime minister in high esteem.

-- BERNAMA

AR LAT KGO