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No rest for Kedah BN in close battle

Abdul Razak Ahmad; Elizabeth John
NO one in Kedah BN slept last night.

Teams conducted house-to-house visits and small group meetings until midnight in constituencies identified as "grey" areas.

There is a reason for this 11th hour intensity: the battle for the northern State is too close to call. Predictions change by the hour.

Some BN officials predict a 30-6 win in the 36-seat State Assembly while the Opposition believes it will sneak in with a 19-17 victory.

The huge difference indicates how difficult it has been for both sides as well as the pundits to gauge where the fence-sitters will swing. A more realistic assessment sees BN winning at least 24 state seats.

Kedah has been on the radar screen since Pas won 12 state seats and eight of the 15 parliament seats in the 1999 election.

Hence the decision by the party to field its heavyweights and declare its intention to wrest control of the State from BN.

But State BN chairman Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain believes that the Pas threat will be headed off.

"We have overcome past mistakes, and you can see for yourselves how there is no serious cases cantasmencantas (sabotage), no Umno A and Umno B this time around.

"This is our best opportunity to redeem ourselves. We are all hungry for victory," he said.

Kedah BN received a helping hand from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. The former Prime Minister gave a pep talk to party members and blasted Pas for its hypocrisy.

Earlier in the campaign, he laid down a challenge to Syed Razak, telling him that anything less than a sterling victory would be unacceptable.

"It is because we did not do so well in 1999 that we must regain our lost honour in Kedah and show good results this time," he said.

Pas politicians were modest about their chances. They said the party expected to maintain the 12 seats it won five years ago. Sources, however, say the party believes it will have a simple majority after the polls.

State Pas Commissioner Azizan Abdul Razak gave his party a 50-50 chance of taking control of Kedah.

"It will be a very close and very tough fight."

Pas has conducted a stealth-like campaign and has used problems in the State's administration, as well as infighting in Umno to attack the BN.

Interestingly, both sides are also unsure about the true strength of their adversary.

Ceramah, which used to be a staple fare of past elections and which served as an indicator of the Opposition's support, has been abandoned in favour of house-to-house campaigning.

The BN campaign too has been low-key, concentrating its efforts in specific seats that Pas won with narrow majorities.

Parti Keadilan Nasional is more optimistic about the Opposition's chances. Vice-president Saifuddin Nasution Ismail said the aim to take Kedah was within reach.

He said: "We can get the minimum 19 and anything more would be a bonus."