

## **Najib saving Taib or seeking his ouster?**

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An already exciting Sarawak election took an unexpected twist the last 24 hours, with question marks raised about Putrajaya's role in Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud's quit date.

It began on Monday night at the Kuching MBKS indoor stadium, with Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's speech.

Although Najib spent most of his time rebutting the main points raised by the opposition in the urban areas, it was his assurance that Taib would definitely step down that caught the media's attention.

This was his first speech of his six-day tour of the nation's largest state, which many speculate had been necessitated by the faltering campaign of the ruling coalition in Sarawak.

But almost 24 hours later, in Kuching last night, Taib took everyone by surprise during a free concert at Padang Merdeka, saying he would step down only "in a few years" time.

Although Taib mentioned this in passing, it was done in Najib's presence, and many opposition leaders interpreted it as an open defiance of Putrajaya's wish.

Although Najib has publicly said that Taib "is not a liability for the BN", it is no secret that the chief minister's significant baggage will bog down the peninsula-based coalition.

In what appears to be an attempt to shift the focus completely away from Taib, the second half of the campaign will see Najib and his federal cabinet members criss-crossing the state.

A check of the Information Department's website reveals that most of the official functions listed in the state calendar in the coming days will be presided by federal ministers or their deputies.

It is understood that even the weekly federal cabinet meeting has been cancelled because nearly all the ministers are now in Sarawak.

This begs the question whether Sarawak BN had sent SOS signals to its federal counterparts, or whether Putrajaya sent in reinforcements on its own initiative.

### **Dire consequences if BN loses**

Thus far, Sarawak BN's campaigns in the urban areas have been disappointing, right from the start.

The urban-based Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) has been left reeling due to an aggressive Pakatan Rakyat campaign focusing almost entirely on a growing disenchantment with Taib's leadership.

SUPP has clearly been pushed into a corner because its campaign message now hinges on

the warning that, should the party be wiped out by Pakatan, the Chinese community will lose its representation in government.

Rural sentiments are harder to grasp due to a lack of information, but from what has been trickling out in the newspapers, Pakatan campaigners have some reason to be optimistic.

PRS president James Masing (right)james masing reportedly warned that the rural seats of Balai Ringin, Ngemah, Belaga and Pelagus were "tightly contested", even to the point of urging that Pelagus incumbent Larry Sng, his nemesis, be dropped to join the campaign and help BN retain the seat. Sng has refused.

### **The stakes in Sarawak are very high for Najib.**

Should BN lose more than it did in 2006, the consequences would be dire as it would derail his plans to hold nationwide polls, widely speculated to be held this year.

Najib has been clawing back public support for BN in Peninsular Malaysia since taking over in 2009. Significant losses in Sarawak will definitely take out his momentum.

### **Lame-duck CM?**

The schedule of Najib's tour, released on Saturday, shows that he will be intensively touring the state, visiting even remote areas.

Based on his activities yesterday, Najib's team has lined up a series of quick meet-the-people sessions that are expected to be interspersed with announcements of generous government allocations.

In Kuching, he announced an RM300,000 package for the upgrading of the Stutong Community Market, while in Sri Aman, he announced a RM200,000 for the facelift of the dilapidated Sri Aman Hospital.

The chief minister, in contrast, has a less hectic schedule, and his promises of financial allocations have been rare.

It is uncertain who exactly is in charge of the BN campaign right now, but the premier's lightning projects and quick-fix solutions to infrastructural problems are gaining the most publicity.

This obviously has taken a significant amount of heat from the embattled chief minister and given him some breathing space.

But Taib is now at risk of being overshadowed in this campaign by Najib, or worse, being labelled a lame duck.