

Umno 'circling' for foray into S'wak
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The presence of Umno bigwigs and machinery during the BN election campaign in Sarawak has raised questions about the peninsula-based Malay party's role in the state.

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) political science lecture Andrew Aeria (right) is of the opinion that Umno will eventually move into Sarawak.

"But I dare not say more. I can't really see it happening yet but the day (Chief Minister Abdul) Taib (Mahmud) moves away from the scene, there will be some serious moves (into Sarawak by Umno)," he said.

Speaking at a forum on the 10th Sarawak election organised by pollster Merdeka Centre in Selangor last night, Aeria said the possibility of Umno in Sarawak "should not be feared" and that there should be more engagement on this front.

Fellow Unimas political scientist Faisal Syam Hazis said Umno will have a hard time making its case to enter Sarawak after PBB - the local party which represents the Malay-Melanau and Muslim community - won all 35 seats it contested.

This also makes it the party which holds the largest proportion of the Sarawak assembly's 71 seats.

"For Umno to come in, PBB will have to be dissolved. Sarawak BN, including (Dayak-based) PRS and PBDS will try its best to ensure that Umno stays out," he said.

For Sarawakians, Umno is still very much the bogeyman. This was exemplified in a billboard during the election campaign, showing three sharks marked DAP, PAS and PKR circling Sarawak, while an unmarked shark was depicted taking a bite out of Sabah.

"You would assume that the unmarked shark is Umno and that Sarawak BN was killing two birds with one stone," he said to laughter from the audience of about 300.

Whether or not Umno makes a play for Sarawak, Faisal said the fact that BN conceded 16 seats (three times more than 2006) and narrowly won 14 other seats foreshadows strains in federal-state relations.

Ngemah, Telang Usan and Senadin were won with less than 50 percent of votes, while 11 others including Beting Maro, Kedup, Bengoh and Kakus were taken with 50-56 percent of the votes. Most of these seats saw multi-cornered fights.

"With 14 (marginal) seats and 16 seats lost (by BN), there is a genuine threat of losing the two-thirds majority...if the opposition is able to put up a straight fight," Faisal said.

"The expectation was for Sarawak BN to win 80-90 percent of the seats and when they lost 16 with Taib being the lead cause for that, Kuala Lumpur panicked and called for his head (causing) a strain in federal-state relations from now on."

PBB power struggle?

However, Faisal believes that Taib will use the fact that he had retained the two-thirds majority support as a reason to stay and will use his succession plan to show Kuala Lumpur who is boss.

"There is a clear indicator that KL wants (PBB deputy chief) Abang Johari (Abang Openg, left) because he is seen as the leader with the less baggage in terms of corruption.

“But Taib was sworn in as chief minister soon after the two-thirds majority was announced, and as a symbolic gesture, the person sitting next to (Taib's wife that night was PBB vice-president) Awang Tengah.

“Taib is saying: 'I am not stepping down but even if I do, the choice of a successor is mine. I have been the strongman of Sarawak for 30 years and have delivered the parliamentary seats (to BN) so why should I bow down?'. ”

Agreeing with his colleague, Unimas lecturer Neilson Mersat said post-election factional fighting within PBB will be watched for the anticipated “power struggle”, following raised expectations of Taib's departure.

The chief minister in an interview immediately after results were announced on April 16 had said that he is seeking to retire “mid-term”.

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