

Pakatan optimistic about next elections
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John Grafilo, dpa

After a four-hour drive to Malaysia's northern state of Kedah, opposition leader N Surendran rushed to a Hindu harvest festival in the town of Sungai Petani where he spoke of the need to elect a new government.

From the Hindu celebration, the 46-year-old vice-president of the People's Justice Party, went to a Chinese-sponsored opposition fund-raising dinner where he repeated the same message to more than 2,500 Malays, Indians and Chinese - that packed the place.

It was near midnight when Surendran (left) arrived at a rally in a nearby town where opposition icon Anwar Ibrahim called on the crowd to vote for change and oust the National Front (Barisan Nasional) that has ruled the country since independence in the late 1950s.

"We have to stop the corruption, we have to stop the deception, we have to stop the lies now," Anwar said.

Surendran expressed satisfaction at what he witnessed. It was drizzling but the football pitch was covered with a sea of umbrellas as people stood stoically, unmindful of the rain, listening to Anwar.

"You can smell the scent of change in the air. The people thirst for change. The people are ready for change," Surendran told dpa as he headed back to Kuala Lumpur in the wee hours of the morning.

Since Anwar's acquittal on sodomy charges in January, he and his party colleagues have crisscrossed the country to address rallies, meetings and fund-raisers in preparation for the next elections.

The general elections are scheduled for next year, but many analysts believe the vote could be called this year, as early as July.

The opposition has made great strides since the 2008 elections, when it nearly toppled the ruling party after winning 81 of the 166 parliamentary seats in mainland Malaysia.

What saved the ruling coalition was the support of 56 members of parliament from the various political groups in the eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak, on the island of Borneo.

"We were surprised by our victory in 2008," Surendran said. "It was unprecedented in the history of Malaysian politics where the Barisan Nasional usually gets two-thirds majority in every election."

Surendran said the strong opposition showing in the Sarawak state elections in April has boosted its chances for the next elections.

'Silent majority ready for change'

He said a silent majority in Malaysia is ready for change and they would come out on election day.

Krishna, who works in a government-controlled corporation, said he and five other fellow workers have already decided to vote for the opposition.

"We do not go to rallies and we do not talk openly about our politics but we feel that 50 years has been a long time to implement the change and development that they want," he said.

Abdulmalik, a farmer whose family has long supported the Barisan Nasional in Kedah, said he already

told his father about his plans to vote for the opposition.

“He (father) didn’t say anything,” he said. “He told me I am old enough to decide for myself and I believe Anwar can help poor people like us.”

But incumbent Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak said the ruling coalition remains the best choice for Malaysia.

“The people know that only Barisan Nasional has the capacity and experience to lead them and that is why I am very confident that they will give us the decisive mandate in the next general election.”

James Chin, head of the arts and social sciences department of Monash University, said the opposition has likely secured the support of majority of ethnic Chinese, who comprise about 25 percent of the population.

But Chin said the opposition still has a long way to go to convince most Malays, about 60 percent of the country’s 28 million people.

Surendran claimed that his party’s internal polls showed between 40 and 47 percent of Malay voters favour the opposition, enough to tip the balance.

But Chin predicted a tightly contested electoral race that could swing either way.

“We might end up with a hung parliament,” he said.

- dpa

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