

## **PAS opens southern front but BN is fighting back**

**MalaysiaKini.com**

**June 17, 2012**

**By Nigel Aw**

Along the countryside in the Northwestern tip of Johor, the raging war of green flags versus blue in the Malay heartland, gives the impression that the general election had begun.

When PAS flags go up in the kampungs, they are almost immediately met with BN and Umno flags in equal number if not more.

"There were so many Umno flags I thought I was attending an Umno event," remarked Tamrin Abdul Ghafar (left), son of former deputy prime minister Abdul Ghafar Baba, at a PAS ceramah yesterday in Kampung Sungai Terap within the parliamentary constituency of Pagoh.

The swift countering of flags was a reminder to PAS that Umno was acutely of the Islamic party's foray into its stronghold and was prepared to display the strength of its machinery.

PAS' blitz in Johor yesterday targeted three parliamentary seats, namely Pagoh and Ledang on the northwestern tip of the Johor and Sri Gading in the central western region of the state.

The constituencies collectively comprise of seven state seats, six of which are expected to be contested by PAS. They are: N7 Bukit Serampang, N8 Jorak, N9 Gambir, N11 Serom, N21 Parit Yaani and N22 Parit Raja.

### **Making inroads**

Johor PAS commissioner Mahfodz Mohamed repeatedly expressed optimism in making inroads in at least two constituencies where the programmes were held.

Speaking at a luncheon at Tongkang Pechah within the constituency of Parit Yaani, Mahfodz told some 500 people who gathered under the hot sun that the party stood a good chance of capturing the seat.

"When tongkang pecah (the barge breaks), then Umno will sink... in the last general election, we captured Maharani and Sungai Abong, God willing, this time we will capture Parit Yaani," he said.

Parit Yaani is a mixed constituency in which PAS lost by a 3,857-vote majority, in contrast to the largely Malay constituency of neighbouring Parit Raja which the party lost by a 5,827-vote majority in 2008.

The other state seat which PAS feels it has a shot at, Mahfodz said, is Jorak.

"There is no lifeline for Umno here, there is no Felda or Felcra," he declared, adding that the

candidate will be from PAS Muslimat.

The other state seat in Pagoh - which Mahfodz serves as election coordinator - is Bukit Serampang where Mahfoz had contested and lost in 2008.

"My area is much more difficult, there are eight Felda and Felcras here, but it's not impossible to win, we must work hard," he said.

Pagoh is also the parliamentary constituency helmed by Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin (left).

Jorak, like Parit Yaani, is a more mixed seat as compared to its neighbouring Bukit Serampang.

Mixed constituencies

Speaking on the sidelines, PAS Pagoh committee member Azmi Nor said the party is aiming for mixed seats in Johor.

"It's a bit difficult in Malay areas especially when there is Felda," he said.

PAS' Saturday blitz concluded with a night rally in Sagil within the constituency of Gambir which is another mixed seat and was lost by PAS by a much smaller margin compared to other seats at a 2,463-vote majority.

Speaking to over a 1,000 people, Mahfodz sought to outline the opposition policy for Johor which widely resembles the welfare policy of Selangor, on top of federal pledges to abolish critical tolls and provide free education.

He also took great pains to counter the DAP 'chauvinist bogey' launched by BN, stating "We (PAS) will be contesting at least half of the 56 state seats in Johor, how can DAP possibly take over the state?" he said.

The rally was only a stone throw away from the neighbouring state seat of Serom, which is held by current Johor Menteri Besar Abdul Ghani Othman.

Throughout the blitz, PAS president Umno Hadi Awang (right) called on Johoreans to embrace change by backing the opposition's attempt to capture Putrajaya, even raising the possibility of capturing Nusajaya, the centre of power of Johor, in what PAS describes as the "last Umno bastion".

However, Abdul Hadi had been careful to state it would be a difficult task; the goal of Nusajaya appeared to be more of a morale booster for the local machinery as they chipped away at Umno's fort.

Though the turnout in Sagil was modest compared to Pakatan ceramah in other states, a source close to Abdul Hadi insists that the mood in Johor had begun shifting.

"On June 29, when the final Himpunan Hijau rally is held in Johor Bharu, at least two respectable figures will declare their support for PAS," he said.

He added that at least five notable people from Johor, some of which were senior officers with Abdul Ghani (right), have joined PAS but some were reluctant to publicly declare this and would instead assist the party "from within".

"Abdul Ghani is aware that some within its ranks have started rebelling against him," remarked the source.

However, he added that while Abdul Ghani is confident of retaining Johor, internal sources claims the Menteri Besar is putting at least nine of 26 parliamentary seats as being no longer safe.

"According to our sources, he has also acknowledged that BN may lose more than 10 state seats," he said.

The political criss crossing yesterday was the beginning of a two-week attack on Johor and will conclude with a massive rally in Johor Bharu on June 29, where the behind the scenes groundwork laid by PAS in the state is expected to come to fore.

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