

Political observers: Umno's grip on Johor may loosen

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By Aidila Razak

The 13th general election may see Umno grip on its stronghold of Johor loosening, political observers say.

However, this would not translate into the loss of BN's majority in the southern state, veteran journalist Zainon Ahmad said.

"Journalists are not experts, but we observe. I was told as early as two years ago that Johor may no long be the fortress that it has been (for the BN).

"That was when BN was focusing on other things to fix its image, and everyone forgot about Johor... thinking Johor is completely safe and not knowing that an attack was launched," Zainon (left) said.

Speaking at a roundtable discussion organised by the National Professors' Council (MPN), he said Chinese voters were previously relied on to vote for Umno candidates, but these voters have since "changed their minds".

"Now, we hear (Home Minister) Hishammuddin Hussein thinking of moving away from his Sembrong seat because it is a mixed seat, with 30 percent Chinese, so very dangerous.

"He knows that if 50 percent of the Malays there vote for PAS or PKR and half of Chinese do the same, he can lose," Zainon said at the event in Kuala Lumpur.

Fellow panellist and Universiti Sains Malaysia political scientist Sivamurugan Pandian said the 'Singapore factor', which in the election last year saw the biggest swing against the ruling PAP government since independence, could also play a part in BN's slipping grip on neighbouring Johor.

"We need to study how the Chinese in Singapore are able to influence the Chinese in Johor," Sivamurugan said.

Agreeing with him, Universiti Malaya associate professor Khadijah Khalid said younger Johoreans working and studying in Singapore influenced their parents and families, resulting in a change in voter sentiments.

Foreign powers lobbying for regime change?

Admitting that she does not have hard data to back this, Khadijah, a Johorean, said her personal interactions with locals there indicated this trend.

"They become agents of socialisation to influence their parents... which I believe is what happened in Kelantan, with many younger people there working outside the state," she said.

The panel moderator, Utusan Malaysia editor Zaini Hassan, said there were also "external factors" that might be pushing for regime change in Malaysia.

"We have spoken about Singapore, but what about the United States, or even China? All eyes are now on Malaysia," he said.

Seemingly in support of Zaini, MPN's politics, security and international affairs cluster head Mohamed Mustafa Ishak said in his closing remarks that the Singapore factor needed to be viewed more closely.

Quoting an Utusan Malaysia article in 1998, he claimed that Singapore mentor minister Lee Kuan Yew once said that Singapore would only rejoin Malaysia if Umno was no longer in power.

"When the PAP lost some seats (in its recent election) because Singaporeans felt choked by their rising cost of living, etc... could we link this to Singapore's need for more land?

"This is my speculation, but it is the journalists' job to investigate," Mohamed Mustafa said.

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