

Sarawak CM expects to lose four to eight seats

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By Keruah Usit

Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud has predicted Sarawak's BN coalition will lose four to eight seats, out of 31 contested, in the coming parliamentary elections.

PKR state leader Baru Bian (right) forecasts Pakatan will win 11 to 13 seats.

In the 2008 election, BN lost only one seat, Bandar Kuching, to the DAP's Chong Chien Jen.

BN then lost Bandar Sibu to DAP's Wong Ho Leng in a by-election in 2010, despite frantic campaigning by Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, punctuated by his infamous seedy overture, "I'm told you need about three million (ringgit). I want to make a deal with you... you help me, I help you."

In an interview with The Mole, a pro-BN "news blog" on April 2, Taib insisted the Sarawak BN would win handsomely: "I think the lowest would be 23 and the highest would be 27. We are estimating this based on the political reality today."

These estimates are higher than two-thirds of the seats up for contest, or 21 seats. This would be an achievement Taib appears to believe would keep him safe from prosecution for alleged graft, as he himself says history has demonstrated.

"Maybe in the urban areas it looks like as if the opposition is getting some support, but it is not for PKR. PKR is not welcome here. DAP is quite aggressive and they are also trying to make inroads into the Iban community," Taib is reported as saying.

He also dismissed Pakatan leader Anwar Ibrahim's promise of 20 percent oil royalties to be returned to Sabah and Sarawak, compared with the current measly five percent.

"If Pakatan wins, together with their promises, this state will be bankrupt. The oil royalty promise is just a sweet promise that doesn't come from the heart."

Baram dam will proceed

The same blog also reported that Taib accepted that poverty, inadequate public services and the rural-urban drift were pressing problems in Baram, a vast rural seat BN recognises as very much under threat from PKR.

Taib conceded Baram is "an area that suffered some difficulties because of its infrastructure, which led to migration of a lot of educated people to Miri."

He said the hugely unpopular Baram dam would definitely proceed, with the electricity used in the Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (Score), his pet project.

Score is struggling to attract investors, partly because of investigations by international governments into alleged corruption by Taib's family. Sarawak already has a massive glut of electricity.

Despite this, Taib has been gleefully doling out Score construction contracts to members of his own family.

"By having to develop Baram as one of the areas to produce electricity for Score, we have a big project that can allow us to plan for much bolder steps to change the character of development in Baram," he said.

The interviewer did not press Taib on the claims of the Baram residents to the 7,300 hectares of Native Customary Rights (NCR) land that will be flooded by the Baram dam. Taib declared that the anger of the rural people over NCR land was "indeed a hot topic before the state election" two years ago, but insisted that "it is not a popular issue anymore".

The state polls in 2011, held separately from the upcoming parliamentary contest, saw BN lose two rural state seats to PKR candidates Baru Bian in Ba'kelalan and Ali Biju in Krian, and 16 overall.

This rural breakthrough - the first ever non-urban victories by any Pakatan component party in Sarawak - was a direct result of NCR court cases championed by PKR land rights lawyers.

Taib ignored more than 200 NCR court cases filed against his administration and its oil palm or timber corporate partners, still awaiting adjudication.

"When we took some of the lands, it was gazetted for the purpose of building schools, roads and other government projects," he claimed.

'Allah' ban 'verges on racial politics'

Taib also asserted that Umno's ban on the use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims will not play a significant role in Sarawak in the coming election. By saying so, he appears to contradict Najib's stirring vow to "defend" the word "Allah".

"Sarawakians have accepted this issue for the past 50 years," Taib said in the interview. "There are a lot of Christians in Sarawak who bought Bibles from Indonesia and they have used the translation of the word 'God' to 'Allah' as part of their faith. Muslims in Sarawak do not feel affected by it. I don't see why anyone would want to create an issue out of this."

In contorted logic, he went on to accuse the DAP of wanting "to incite hatred among Sarawakians to fight among themselves" by calling for the "Allah" ban to be lifted, in accordance with a 2009 High Court ruling. "To me, this is verging on racial politics," Taib prattled on.

Last December, DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng called on the Najib administration to "allow the use of the word 'Allah' in the Bahasa Malaysia version of the Bible, as has been allowed in Sabah and Sarawak for the last 50 years and practised in the Middle East for more than a thousand years."

"The 'Allah' prohibition is, in fact, racially and religiously divisive - Umno's game plan to win support of Malays in Semenanjung Malaysia," Sarawak PKR vice-chairperson See Chee How retorted.

"But Taib comes from Sarawak, where there is no dominant race or religion. If he takes the Umno hardline, PBB and his political allies in Sarawak will suffer defeat. It is for political expediency that he's trying to distance himself from Umno's ban," See said.

If Taib truly hopes that NCR land conflicts, Umno's "Allah" ban, confiscation of Bibles in the Malay language and threats by Perkasa to burn the Bible will not be heated issues in the campaign, he may well be indulging in a display of wishful thinking.

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