

Will PKR's gamble on Lajim pay off?

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GE13 WATCH SABAH With defections and mutiny weakening the already fractured Sabah PKR, the decision to accommodate former BN MPs Lajim Ukin (Beaufort) and Wilfred Bumburing (Tuaran) and their followers may initially seem like a death wish for PKR in the Borneo state.

But visits to both the Tuaran and Beaufort constituencies that both are defending suggest that the decision to work with Bumburing is proving to be riskier, compared to Lajim (right) who is sitting on more solid ground.

In a kopitiam in Kuala Penyu, one of the two state constituencies under Beaufort, patrons greet each other with the battle cry "Ini kali lah (this time)", despite about 5,000 showing up at a BN rally hours before.

"They were giving RM30 per head, so we went as a family and got RM150. We went mostly to watch the concert before that. We wanted to see Ampal (popular Sabah entertainer Abu Bakar Ellah) perform.

"I even put on a BN shirt, but all that is only skin-deep (kulit aja), one of the patrons," Casnol Ibrahim, told Malaysiakini.

No mutiny

Unlike in Tuaran, Lajim is not facing open revolt due to his good relations with the close-knit community where everyone is either related or have known each other for decades. He also did not step on local toes there as PKR was very weak in that area anyway.

In fact, none of the seats contested under the Lajim-led PPPS quota have been affected by defections or open boycott, except for the Petagas seat, which is under Putatan.

PKR's Putatan division chief and his deputy defected to Umno on Thursday.

In Beaufort, PKR-PPPS is running a tight ship with operation centres spotted every few kilometres in the constituency, while campaign materials line the one-lane roads.

Former corporate figure Ibrahim Menudin (left) and political veteran Yahya Lampong who are contesting Bongawan state seat and Papar parliamentary seat under the PPPS quota too have their materials up in force, but PKR performed poorly in these seats in 2008.

Many of the seats contested by PPPS candidates on the PKR ticket are also in the same leaky boat, in terms of chances, but Lajim's influence as Janang Gayuh (Bisaya chieftain) may come handy in these areas.

Although there are outliers, like Paginatan in the interiors of Ranau, most of the seats contested by PKR under the PPPS quota surround Beaufort, on the western coast where most of the Bisaya community reside.

The John Ghani factor

Lajim, who is also contesting the state seat of Klias, has another ace up his sleeve in the form of John Ghani, who is contesting the Kuala Penyu seat.

The duo are seen to be close friends and getting John to contest on the PKR ticket raises the party's chances of winning there significantly.

Although defeated by a sliver of three percent of votes to BN in 2008, John is highly respected and is an institution in the area. His 4,156 votes and PKR's 889 votes combined could have kept BN at bay.

A founding member of Sabah Umno who left the party many years ago, John won in 2004 as an Independent.

Locals remember that he campaigned then as a one-man show and did not even have election machinery.

He may nevertheless lose some votes to BN's Limus Jury, a young contractor who is favoured by youths in the area for providing training and jobs.

:Limus got the contract to build the roads here. If before the young people didn't have skills, now they have licenses to drive excavators," one supporter said.

The man, who is in his thirties, also likes BN's idea to turn Kuala Penyu's untouched stretch of beach into a tourist destination.

Klias next door is also home to the proboscis monkey and is an eco-tourism spot.

Although water supply is a big problem in Beaufort, he says this is no longer a consideration as a water plant is already being built thanks to a generous federal grant.

Past sins

Lajim's past sins, including his defection from PBS that eventually toppled the state government, as highlighted in 'poison booklets' (below) distributed in Kuala Penyu may also haunt him.

"I will never vote Lajim. He brought down my party and he sold off state land," the Limus supporter who declined to be named said. In his lawn he has put up a PBS flag.

Those who agree with him will most likely vote in favour of BN's Azizah Mohd Dun, who won the seat in 2004. Star's candidates, locals say, do not stand a chance.

The man's mother, like many others met by Malaysiakini, however, does not share his views.

"Azizah is good too but at the coffee shops, in the vilages, they all say they will support Lajim. He has a lot of influence," she said, adding that his departure from Umno has little effect on their support.

This could see Beaufort fall into Pakatan Rakyat's lap, but whether Lajim can extend his clout in the remainder parliamentary seats of Sipitang, Papar, and Kimanis, which all surround Beaufort, is still a matter of question.

But with voting patterns in these areas putting the opposition as severe underdogs in this area, PKR's can only stand to gain through Lajim, despite BN's strongest efforts to tar him.