

## **Najib and Anwar turn up the heat in Saratok**

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**By Kow Gah Chie**

GE13 WATCH SARAWAK The sleepy town of Saratok - some 60km south of Sarikei - experienced a starstruck weekend due to the appearance of both BN chairperson Najib Abdul Razak and PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim.

The duo were here to pour fuel into an already heated battle shaping up between BN's William Mawan Ikon, the favourite to win, and PKR candidate Ali Biju, who is one of Sarawak PKR's latest poster-child.

Ali Biju was a virtual unknown in Sarawak politics until he miraculously defeated long-time Krian state assemblyperson Peter Nyarok Entrie, the Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) deputy president, during the 2011 state elections.

This time round, Ali Biju is taking on the SPDP president William Mawan Ikon - a big name for Sarawakian politics - for the Saratok parliamentary seat, which is not being defended by incumbent Jelaing Mersat.

For PKR, what is at stake is the fact that it is having its first Sarawakian bumiputera enter Parliament and defeating one of BN's most prominent Dayak figure. Thus, it is no surprise that Najib was called for special reinforcement.

Anwar was in Kabong on Friday, where he spoke about how corruption in Sarawak had hampered development and that it is Pakatan Rakyat's goal to address the matter.

"This is the first time in history where we have a chance to defeat BN and replace them as the federal government.

"We want to ensure that the rights of the people are upheld, that you have land rights and that government contracts are distributed fairly," Anwar told a crowd of 1,000 people during a mid-afternoon rally.

Najib arrived a day later and spoke in the town of Saratok before a crowd of 1,500 people. He mostly stressed about how only BN can bring development and promised more cash handouts as well.

On paper, Mawan is a hot favourite because based on the 2011 state election results for Krian and Kalaka - the two state seats under the Saratok parliamentary

constituency - BN has the upper hand.

However, a sizeable amount of votes went to an Independent named Ismail Hussein in the Kalaka seat, which Ali Biju's team hopes to capture.

Religion is a factor

Religion is believed to be a factor in Kalaka because it has a large Muslim community here. It is noted that Ali Biju is a Christian. The PKR candidate who contested for Kalaka in 2011 fared badly, coming in third against the Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) incumbent.

Ali Biju's team said they have to influence 14 key Malay villages to win and that they have been doing much groundwork there over the past 18 months.

They are also having some luck with the rural Dayak community, gaining entry to campaign in more longhouses than in 2011 to spread his message about the need for change.

NONE He has an impressive resume to boot. He is an American-trained civil engineer and has corporate experience. He owns and operates a successful logistics company in Bintulu.

As for Mawan (left), his campaign has been centred on the fact that he is a local-born and has made many contributions to Sarawak as a state cabinet member.

However, Mawan's Achilles' Heel appears to be the fact that Jelaing, the two-term Saratok incumbent and caretaker deputy transport minister, was dropped.

When campaigning at the Roban longhouse yesterday, Mawan had to explain why he was being fielded there - despite being the Pakan state assemblyperson in the neighbouring Julau parliamentary constituency - and that Jelaing was not being backstabbed.

According to The Borneo Post on April 18, Jelaing said that he felt betrayed because Mawan had promised the former that he would be defending the Saratok seat.

Despite possible backlash from Jelaing's supporters, Mawan told Malaysiakini that he had a reasonably good chance of winning after six days of campaigning.

NONE In rural Sarawak, a personal touch is important and it would appear that this

is where Ali Biju (right in photo) has a slight edge over Mawan, who was born in Saratok, but raised elsewhere.

Geramin Inyiu, a local from Baratong, said that Mawan was more inclined to deal with the longhouse chiefs directly rather than the residents, who many not necessary follow directions on who to vote.

Like many other Sarawakians, his biggest grief with the present state government was a lack of development and properly tarred roads in his area.

Udin Sidom, a SPDP member, said he was disappointed that an "outsider" was being fielded as a candidate and that he has spotted Jelaing's men campaigning against BN.

Sulie Jamtal, from Enjangkang Roban, said residents of his longhouse were more likely to vote based on the candidate's personality and do consider other matters beyond local issues.

"We listen to Radio Free Sarawak. Sometimes, we tune in at a public area together or in our own rooms," he said.

It is likely that the radio her longhouse used was among the 1,000 radios which Ali Biju had distributed throughout Saratok.

However, some voters are staunch BN supporters and do not mind whether Mawan is fielded, nor do they worry about state and national issues.

"I vote for BN ever since Malaysia was formed," said Rahmad Mut, a 68-year-old retiree, adding that only BN can bring development to Saratok and Kabong.

"Ali Biju is only a state assemblyperson, he's not a state minister, he can't bring development to the area," he stressed.