

Sabah's rising Star set to be Pakatan's headache

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INTERVIEW With the two coalitions, the BN and Pakatan Rakyat shaping up to do battle at the Sabah state assembly, State Reform Party's (Star) Jeffrey Gapari Kitingan is the odd one out in the House.

NONE Having won the Bingkor state seat on May 5, 19 years after he last held a state assembly seat, the veteran Sabah politician took the Sabah chapter of Sarawak-based Star into mainstream politics in his state within a year of its formation.

However, to Pakatan, and particularly to PKR, Jeffrey is also a bitter reminder as the opposition could have won 20 state seats instead of 12 if it was not for split voting - that could have meant only one seat away from denying BN two-thirds majority in Sabah.

azlan Of the eight seats lost to split voting, Star was the biggest spoiler, being responsible for half of them - Kiulu, Liawan, Nabawan and Paginatan - which would have been won by PKR.

PKR now controls seven state seats, while DAP holds four and Star has one in the 60-seat house - a significant increase from a sole opposition seat won by DAP at the 2008 general election.

Jeffrey, too, has had to pay the price for this stubbornness as he was defeated by his brother and PBS chief Joseph Pairin Kitingan in the parliamentary constituency of Keningau - where PKR was the spoiler.

Jeffrey garnered 11,900 votes to Joseph's 15,818, while the PKR candidate Stephen Sandor obtained 7,825 votes.

The opposition would have also picked up three additional parliamentary seats - Kota Marudu, Tenom and Pensiangan - if it was not for split voting, with the Star being the biggest spoiler in all three seats.

Despite the election results showing that cooperation among the opposition parties to be critical, Jeffrey is adamant about the "peninsula-based parties" staying out of Sabah.

"There is no point working with other groups that will not make an impact... We want to be strong in the non-urban areas, so where is the role of these people?" he told Malaysiakini in an interview in Kota Kinabalu last week.

'No bridge with PKR'

Jeffrey was particularly repugnant towards PKR, a party in which he was once vice-president, and said the only ground he was willing to concede was the possibility of working with DAP, which had proven itself in the urban areas of Sabah.

anwar and jeffrey in KKHe pointed out that PKR lacked grassroots support in Sabah and that PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim had to rope in former BN leaders like Lajim Ukin and Wilfred Bumburing to bolster the party before the May 5 general election.

Asked whether this position he was taking could see a repeat of the same results in the next general election, Jeffrey replied: "We'll let the people decide".

Even though Jeffrey was the sole representative from Star to win the the 13th general election, the party proved itself capable of attracting substantial votes and this hardline position will be a major hurdle, particularly for PKR in moving forward in Sabah.

However, Jeffrey conceded that Pakatan's message to change the BN-led state government had resonated with the voters.

"The media was painting a picture as if the battle was only between BN and Pakatan, which was promoting the concept of change," he said.

NONEHe said even the slogan he had first coined, 'Ini Kali-Lah', was "hijacked" by Pakatan, leading the people to believe that the slogan belonged to the opposition pact.

Jeffrey said Star would adjust the party's message to incorporate the message of "change" and added that it would also intensify its message on Sabahan rights.

Furthermore, he said, the party would also engage in poverty eradication programmes to strengthen its foothold in the interior areas of the state.

"My goal is to make Sabah autonomous... it does not matter whether it is BN or Pakatan, as long as I can persuade the leaders to see what I see... Star does not

need to be in power to do that," he said.

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