

Dr M-Najib feud spices up upcoming by-elections

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By Nigel Aw

ANALYSIS Being the respective strongholds of PKR and Umno, the Permatang Pauh and Rompin by-elections were initially expected to be a dull affair.

But the electoral battles may now turn into a proxy war in the tussle between former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak.

It has been two weeks since Mahathir fired at all cylinders against Najib, but the spat has largely confined to verbal attacks with limited political damage.

Najib's supporters have made public pledges of loyalty in a bid to contain the damage from Mahathir's allegations, ranging from the massive debt of 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) to the motive behind the murder of Altantuya Shaariibuu.

However, Mahathir's ally Daim Zainuddin had pointed out that the support may be superficial as it was the norm for Umno members to publicly back their president.

The Rompin by-election will be a barometer of how genuine the support for Najib is.

The seat fell vacant after Jamaluddin Jarjis, a member of Najib's inner circle who has held the constituency for 25 years, died in a helicopter crash earlier this month.

Despite the strong anti-establishment sentiments in the last general election, Jamaluddin managed to increase his majority from 10,679 to 15,114 votes in the seat which is adjacent to Najib's own Pekan constituency.

Mahathir's allegations may serve as ammo for PAS which will take on Umno in the by-election.

While Umno is likely to retain the seat, a slash in the majority in Najib's home ground will allow Mahathir to claim moral authority in the allegations he has levelled against the prime minister and that it is resonating with the people.

If Umno can significantly strengthen its majority in the Rompin by-election, it will be a rebuke against Mahathir and show that support for Umno under Najib remains unwavering despite his warnings that Umno will be defeated in the next general election.

Bid to embarrass Dr M

Najib's supporters can also capitalise on the Permatang Pauh by-election in Penang by forcing Mahathir's son Mukhriz, who is menteri besar in next door Kedah, to campaign there and publicly back Najib.

Even now Najib's loyalists have pressed Mukhriz to publicly declare support for the Umno president or resign as menteri besar.

But the Permatang Pauh by-election slated for May 7 will be further opportunity to show Mahathir's son is under Najib's thumb and embarrass the Umno veteran.

The seat fell vacant following the jailing of PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim. Umno, which is contesting the seat, will also want to take advantage of the factious state in Pakatan Rakyat.

However, Umno may find itself having to parry Mahathir's allegations which PKR will surely exploit in the by-election.

While both by-elections will be a battle between BN and Pakatan, the opposition coalition which is already in disarray is a lesser threat to Najib compared to Mahathir.

Behind the electoral campaigns, both Najib and Mahathir will want to come out of the double by-elections in a stronger position for the real battle to come.