

Scandal-hit Najib seeks big win in state polls

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S'WAK POLLS Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak is going all out to secure a resounding victory in Sarawak when the state goes to the polls this Saturday, seeking to put a year of turmoil at government investment fund 1MDB behind him.

Politicians and pundits expect the ruling BN coalition to comfortably win the state election, but analysts say Najib wants a landslide victory to show he still has the confidence of the people after the 1MDB financial scandal rocked the country.

On the campaign trail in Sarawak, Najib has made big money pledges and taken his entourage to remote villages as he canvasses support.

“This is a good example of our continued high commitment to Sarawak,” he told a media conference in Kuching, after holding a cabinet meeting in the state’s capital and approving RM3.5 billion (US\$878 million) in projects and investment for the state.

Sarawakians have rallied behind Najib’s ally, Chief Minister Adenan Satem. Adenan has brokered greater autonomy for the resource-rich state and dealt with long-standing issues such as recognition of native land rights since taking over the reins in 2014.

Najib will likely project a convincing win for Adenan as a personal victory.

“It is an important election for Najib... a moral booster for BN and Najib if Adenan wins big, even though the election cannot be used as a barometer for BN’s popularity nationwide,” said Arnold Puyok, a political analyst at University of Malaysia Sarawak.

Najib has been facing calls to step down over allegations of graft and billions of dollars in misappropriated funds at 1MDB.

Critics say Najib was a beneficiary of 1MDB's funds, after about US\$681 million was deposited in his bank account before a 2013 election.

Najib and 1MDB have dismissed those claims but some political heavyweights in Umno have publicly questioned whether Najib can lead the party to victory in the 2018 general election.

Najib has dismissed the allegations and consolidated power by sacking dissenters within Umno, which has ruled Malaysia since 1957, and using a controversial sedition law against other critics.

Unfair advantage

The South China Sea divides Sarawak from the Malaysian peninsula and insulates it from goings-on there. The mostly rural population of 2.6 million struggles with lack of access to basic amenities and poor roads in the mountainous and densely forested interior.

The opposition has accused Najib of "hijacking" the Sarawak polls, which are largely fought on local issues.

Many of their leaders were barred entry to Sarawak, which maintains autonomy over immigration rights.

PKR vice-president Nurul Izzah, the daughter of jailed former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, said she was denied entry in Miri. She said the ban on many opposition leaders has left them severely outmatched.

"They are forced to face the likes of the prime minister and the deputy prime minister dispensing cash like there's no tomorrow whilst their only 'semananjung' (peninsula) counter force is held up by the immigration," said Nurul.

Multimedia and Communications Minister Salleh Said Keruak said the federal government's spending plans were only meeting its responsibilities to work with the state government.

In Miri, some 800km from Kuching, opposition leaders are hopeful voters will see through Najib's spending pledges.

"It is to our disadvantage. Their huge machinery is very strong," said Alan Ling, incumbent DAP assemblyperson from Piasau.

And while Sarawak's urban voters have become more critical of the government, the rural vote base - which will decide the outcome of more than two-thirds of the 82 seats being contested - remains largely oblivious to the political intrigues of the capital.

"I just listen to these people talk, but I don't know anything about 1MDB... I don't know who I'll vote for," 61-year-old security guard Sabai Bajik, a native Iban, said at an opposition rally.

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