

Muhyiddin tries to glue together 'hot and cold' Sabah allies

Malaysiakini

16 September 2020

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SABAH POLLS | Perikatan Nasional, BN and PBS may call themselves allies in the Sabah election but the Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) alliance has been sending confusing signals since the campaign started on Sept 12.

From clashing on the chief ministerial candidate and seat allocation to endorsing independents contesting against their own allies and accusing each other of betrayal, PN, BN and PBS don't seem sure that they want to be friends.

In the face of this, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin has tirelessly tried to bring the disparate allies together and today nudged them further into a formal alliance by binding them to a joint manifesto under GRS.

Speaking in Kota Kinabalu in the presence of representatives from PN, BN and PBS, Muhyiddin called the manifesto unprecedented and pledged to fulfil the Malaysia Agreement 1963.

His push to unite the Sabah opposition, is in part, to counter the Warisan Plus incumbent, which alliance comprising Warisan, Pakatan Harapan and Upko, has been able to put together a united front by offering a single candidate for all 73 seats up for grabs in the election.

Muhyiddin had tried to do the same, personally getting involved in 11th-hour negotiations only to see the allies in clashing 11 seats. This increased to 17 after nomination day as the allies made last-minute manoeuvrings against each other.

GRS is contesting under three logos, namely the PN banner for Bersatu, Star and SAPP, the BN logo for Umno, PBRS and MCA, while PBS is contesting under their own symbol. PAS is an ally but is sitting out of the state election.

Undeterred, Muhyiddin who has taken up the "fatherly" figure within and outside of the fledgeling alliance with campaign materials referring to him as "Abah", pushed ahead with the manifesto unveiling today.

Despite Muhyiddin's efforts, it was apparent that he has a monumental task ahead with some of the feuding party representatives at the event seen to be avoiding each other.

PBS was represented by its deputy president Radin Malek and secretary-general

Jajid Jahim, who did not engage PBRs deputy president Arthur Joseph Kurup and Star president Jeffrey Kittingan.

The icy relationship among some allies

PBRs and Star are upset that PBS had at the 11th hour decided to encroach into their allocated constituencies, leading to fresh internal clashes within the new alliance.

Kitingan (above) had expressed his unhappiness at PBS' manoeuvring and revealed that PN is retaliating by endorsing independent candidates in seats allocated to PBS.

However, the fact that Muhyiddin managed to get all of them in the same place was a small win for the Bersatu president.

Just yesterday, PBS was not even expected to attend the unveiling of the manifesto today.

PBS was not included in the promotional material for the unveiling and an aide to a top PBS leader had also confirmed they won't be attending.

In the end, the representatives of all three political groupings turned up today to sign their pledge (Aku Janji) for the manifesto which was witnessed by some 300 supporters.

Radin was again asked about PBS' manoeuvring against its allies but declined to dwell on it.

"That's a long story. I think our leader already explained. I don't want to comment anymore," he told journalists.

While there were some icy moments during the event, other component party leaders were more measured.

Sabah Bersatu chairperson Hajiji Mohd Noor and Sabah Umno chairperson Bung Moktar Radin may be in a struggle for the position of chief minister if GRS wins but they were careful not to ruffle feathers at the event.

Allies dodge sensitive CM topic

Notably absent was BN chairperson Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who was last night campaigning for his coalition in Kota Kinabalu.

Muhyiddin had mooted Hajiji (above) as chief minister in Tuaran on Sept 12 but was careful not to weigh into the touchy topic at the event today.

Subsequently, Zahid maintained that the party that wins the most seats should get to decide the chief ministerial candidate, giving BN an upper hand as it is contesting 42 seats compared to PN's 29 seats and PBS' 22 seats.

Today, they steered clear of the controversial disputes and instead focussed on the manifesto.

Bung pledged that GRS is committed to fulfil the manifesto or face punishment while Hajiji called it a new deal to bring Sabah to a new era.

At a press conference later, Hajiji was asked about Zahid's position that the party that wins the most seats should decide who becomes the chief minister. He maintained his diplomatic tone, stating that PN was contesting many seats too.

Hajiji, who is defending his Sulaman state seat, stressed that the issue of who becomes chief minister was not a priority now and should only be discussed after the election.

Bung did not join the press conference but spoke briefly with journalists before

leaving, echoing the message that it should only be decided later. Bung is contesting the newly-created state seat of Lamag.

The manifesto, among others, focusses on Sabah rights, unity, clean leaders and economic development.

This includes improving Sabah's rights to petroleum resources, ensuring the state gets equitable development allocation and protecting the freedom of religion in the state.

The snap election was called after Musa Aman unsuccessfully tried to take over the Warisan Plus-led state government through defections.

Sabah Chief Minister Shafie Apdal outmanoeuvred Musa by securing a dissolution of the state assembly before Musa could be sworn in, paving the way to fresh elections.

Sabahans will decide on their new government on Sept 26.

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Source: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/542867>