

Opposition to gauge voter sentiments in Machap
Malaysiakini.com
April 10, 2007

Ruling coalition Barisan Nasional will win the Machap by-election in Malacca on Thursday, analysts say, but a reduced majority will signal the opposition are gaining ground.

Some 9,600 residents in the rural Machap constituency will vote in the closely-watched state assembly poll, called after the death of a ruling coalition lawmaker.

The contest is between Lai Meng Chong, 56, fielded by the MCA, part of the ruling coalition, and the opposition DAP's Liou Chen Kuang, 33.

"We are expecting to win but the question is the majority. Anything less than 3,000 votes would be disappointing," an MCA party insider told AFP.

Analysts say it is unlikely that the opposition party will win the seat because the ruling BN coalition wields greater influence over rural areas than the DAP, which campaigns on issues appealing to urban voters.

Instead, the by-election will indicate how well the opposition parties are faring ahead of an early general election, they say.

Malaysia must hold a general election by 2009, but opposition parties say Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will call a vote before then to head off what they say is growing disenchantment with his administration.

"DAP is not going to win, that's for sure. So the important thing is how many votes it can get," said independent political analyst James Wong.

"It will serve to indicate the trend leading up to the general election."

Opposition pact

Analysts are also watching the effectiveness of the pact between the DAP and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), which is campaigning for the DAP candidate, and whose advisor is former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim.

"We've been here from day one ... working out from DAP's operations room. Anwar will be coming down to Machap on Wednesday," Keadilan's information chief Tian Chua told AFP, adding he expected a general election "any time soon."
Chua also said PKR had decided not to contest the Machap poll to boost ties between the parties.

"It is for the unity of the opposition - to work together for the general election," he said.

The DAP, PKR and the hardline Islamic party PAS joined to form the Alternative Front alliance in 1999 to contest the general elections.

However, the alliance was weakened after the DAP, which is rooted in the country's Chinese population, left in 2001 in disagreement over PAS' plans to convert Malaysia into an Islamic

state.

Both PKR and PAS made a poor showing in the 2004 general elections, which delivered a landslide victory to Abdullah and the BN.

"It is time for both opposition parties to show strength and test the ground for them to work closely amongst themselves," said Mohammad Agus Yusoff, the head of the political science department at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

A second by-election - this time in Selangor's Ijok - is also in the cards after a local lawmaker from the ruling coalition died last week.

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