

Penang : so near, yet so far for opposition
Malaysiakini.com
Mar 07, 2008
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analysis Election campaigning has been as sizzling hot as Penang's famous char keow teow and as spicy as its asam laksa. And, 24 hours before the polls, the 709,323 voters are still queuing up for everything on offer.

dap penang mega rally 060308 crowd4Penang, touted as the hottest battleground this general election, is still turning up the heat, especially on the Barisan Nasional (BN).

The opposition appears to have garnered a substantial following over the past two weeks and can potentially make inroads in eight more constituencies in the 40-seat Penang assembly.

These are Perai, Bagan Dalam, Bagan Jermal, Padang Lalang, Bukit Tambun, Air Putih, Batu Lanchang and Paya Terubong.

DAP and PAS respectively are expected to retain Sungai Puyu and Permatang Pasir, which they won in 2004.

penang bn ceramah 060308 bn candidatesEven with 10 seats among them, however, the opposition parties will fall short of denying BN a two-thirds majority, let alone meeting their target of forming the next state government - the twin objectives of their campaign.

The 'winds of change' are stronger in mainland Seberang Perai, where seven of the 10 seats appear winnable for the opposition.

If the projections are realised, MCA will be the biggest loser as its candidates are contesting in five of the 'black' seats for the BN, compared to Gerakan (two), MIC (two) and Umno (one).

In the opposition ranks, the biggest gainer will be DAP (contesting in eight), PKR (one) and PAS (one).

Two others - Kebun Bunga and Komtar - are seen as 'grey seats', with a 50-50 chance for the Gerakan and MCA contestants respectively.

'Winnable' state seats

DAP sources expressed confidence over six seats - Air Putih, Paya Terubong, Bagan Dalam, Perai, Padang Lalang and Sungai Puyu - and see an even chance in Komtar, Pengkalan Kota, Batu Lanchang and Bagan Jermal.

PKR insiders see success for the party in Bukit Tambun and Kebun Bunga, as well as Penanti and Permatang Pasir, where PAS is fielding candidates.

lim guan eng anwar ceramah penang 030308 speechThe Air Putih and Bagan Jermal seats are almost in DAP's hands as the party is fielding its heavyweights, secretary-general Lim Guan Eng and four-term Bagan MP Lim Hock Seng respectively.

In Air Putih, MCA's Tan Yoke Cheng has run into additional difficulty generated by party members who are loyal to incumbent Lye Siew Weng and who had wanted the latter to defend the seat.

In Perai and Bagan Dalam, which have a significant proportion of Indian voters, tensions have been high since a mass protest organised in Kuala Lumpur by the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) last November.

It is almost a foregone conclusion that Perai will fall to the DAP's P Ramasamy, but MIC is keeping its hopes alive in Bagan Dalam where incumbent P Subbaiyah is seeking re-election.

In Bukit Tambun, the only winnable seat for PKR, its candidate Law Choo Kiang is banking on his 'Mr Nice Guy' image to win over voters, some 18 percent of whom are Indians.

Law became popular after he lost to Gerakan's Huan Cheng Guan in the Batu Kawan parliamentary seat in 2004. The two have been 'reunited' in the Bukit Tambun state seat this time around.

In Padang Lalang, Batu Lanchang and Paya Terubong, DAP hopes to capitalise on the small margins recorded in 2004, especially in Batu Lanchang where it lost by 139 votes.

Status quo in federal seats

No major surprises are expected in the 13 parliamentary seats, where the status quo could be maintained.

A keen fight is, however, expected in Jelutong between DAP's Jeff Ooi and Gerakan's Dr Thor Teong Gee.

Although both are newcomers, Gerakan sources said the party is at risk of losing the seat since Ooi has made a name for himself in relation to the state's economic performance - even acting Gerakan head Dr Koh Tsu Koon, the outgoing chief minister, singled him out for mention (albeit to deny the claims).

Given the situation, Gerakan adviser Dr Lim Keng Yaik has turned up to campaign for Thor, although the veteran has denied that this is because of the latter's shaky position.

DAP is optimistic about retaining its four parliamentary seats of Bagan, Bukit Mertajam, Tanjong and Gelugor.

PKR president Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail may continue to gain sympathy votes from women voters who make up 51 percent of the electorate in Permatang Pauh, but she will have to contend with the increase of some 4,000 new voters.

Voters in Bukit Gelugor are struggling to choose between two equally senior - in terms of age and political experience - candidates. They are DAP incumbent and lawyer Karpal Singh and MCA's Koay Kar Huah.

Karpal is the party national chairperson, while Koay is known for his constituency service as he is the incumbent state assemblyperson for Seri Delima, one of three state seats under

Bukit Gelugor.

There have been rumblings against Karpal because of his infrequent appearances in his constituency, but it is believed that he can retain the seat with his 'champion of your rights' brand name.

Key seats to watch

Two other parliamentary seats to watch are Batu Kawan and Bayan Baru, where BN is expected to win the seats, although with a reduced majority.

Batu Kawan will be the site for what has been dubbed "the battle of the academicians" - but while Koh is likely to defeat Ramasamy, he will need to win a handsome majority as he is moving into federal-level politics.

This is also the first time he is leading the BN Penang campaign, so he will hope for a strong showing by appealing to Chinese (56 percent) and Malay (20 percent) voters. Ramasamy's strength will be mainly based in the 24 percent Indian vote-bank because of the Hindraf factor.

In Bayan Baru, MCA's Ooi Siew Kim is likely to win despite the circulation of a poison-pen letter and party members wanting incumbent Wong Kam Hoong to contest.

Ooi, a lawyer, faces PKR Penang chief Zahrain Mohamed Hashim. He is a former local Umno strongman who enjoys popularity among Malay voters, who make up 39 percent of the constituency.

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