

BN's last-ditch bid to counter opposition
Malaysiakini.com
Mar 07, 2008

The Barisan Nasional coalition made an all-out push today on the eve of elections to counter a resurgent opposition which hopes to deny it a two-thirds majority for the first time. MCPX

Political observers said the coalition that has ruled for half a century is rattled by signs that minority ethnic Chinese and Indians will defect to the opposition led by charismatic former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim.

Newspapers linked to the government, which is dominated by Muslim Malays who make up 60 percent of the population, splashed front-page warnings that the minorities could lose their voice in the multi-ethnic coalition.

penang bn ceramah 060308 abdullah arrived "I do not want to form a government that is made up of only one race," Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said of the indications that the Chinese and Indian parties in the BN coalition could be hit tomorrow.

"I hope the status quo is maintained in the interests of all."

Pollsters are tipping the opposition to claim about a fifth of the seats in the new 222-seat parliament, doubling its presence but falling short of the 75 it needs to break the majority that allows the government to amend the constitution at will.

The Merdeka Centre research firm said the three opposition parties could seize about 40 seats, mostly to the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party and the Islamic hardliners PAS.

Abdullah's government has mounted a savage attack on Anwar in recent days, in what observers said was a sign his PKR party is posing a real threat by appealing to voters of all races - a first in Malaysian politics.

Reaching out to all races

"Anwar has done a good job in terms of being able to organise a national campaign," said Bridget Welsh, a Southeast Asia expert at Johns Hopkins University, who is here for the elections.

"PKR as a party is trying to reach across the races, and long term that potentially gives it the power to be able to govern."

anwar peneng ceramah 250208 happyAnwar and other opposition leaders have been drawing big crowds at political rallies in Kuala Lumpur, campaigning on issues like high inflation and rising crime rates which resonate with voters.

More than 10,000 Malaysians of all races braved the pouring rain to gather in Lembah Pantai in Kuala Lumpur last night to hear Anwar speak, standing transfixed despite the thunder and lightning.

"You can cheat as much as you want, but you cannot change the will of the people," he roared, drawing chants of "reformasi, reformasi", the battle cry that emerged after his 1998

dismissal and jailing.

Meanwhile, Abdullah is attempting to shore up support from minorities concerned over the rising "Islamisation" of Malaysia and decades-old discrimination policies that favour Malays.

"The tone is becoming increasingly defensive," Welsh said. "They've moved from trying to focus on their rhetoric, to attacking the opposition, which shows a real sense of concern."

May not be a fair fight

Opposition parties warn that the polls may not be a fair fight, saying they are concerned over fraud including phantom voters and manipulation of postal votes in tightly contested seats.

Steven Gan, founder of online news portal Malaysiakini, said activity on the site had risen dramatically in recent months after unprecedented protests by ethnic Indians.

"I think that definitely you can sense there is a heightened interest, but whether this will be translated into votes is another issue," he said.

A notable battle in the campaign is in Kelantan, the only state the coalition does not hold and which it is hoping to snatch from the Islamic PAS, which has ruled there for 18 years.

"We think we will win by a comfortable margin," said Awang Adek Hussin, who is leading the BN charge to retake impoverished Kelantan, with promises of billions of dollars in investment and infrastructure.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.
Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/79379>