

Will Permatang Pauh stand by him?
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Athi Veerangan

To say that the outcome of the Permatang Pauh parliamentary by-election on Aug 26 will have serious political repercussions on the future direction of the country is indeed an understatement.
MCPX

A win for opposition icon Anwar Ibrahim would not only be a major boost to him and Pakatan Rakyat's relentless march towards Putrajaya, but also confirm the rakyat's desire for a change in the system.

anwar ibrahim sodomy 2 trail court case 080808 06However, an upset win for Barisan Nasional could quash Anwar's political ambitions and signal the demise of undercurrent movements across the country demanding for more liberal, democratic governance emphasising on equality, justice and freedom for all.

The whole euphoria of the March 8 general election would then collapse.

Universiti Sains Malaysia senior lecturer in the School of Social Sciences, Dr Sivamurugan Pandian acknowledged that the by-election was crucial for BN, Pakatan and civil society movements in the country.

He said the nation is at a crossroads due to an uprising seeking a change in the administrative system and governance, and Permatang Pauh voters have unwittingly assumed the role of 'kingmakers' to resolve the political dilemma.

"Permatang Pauh voters hold the decisive key on the future direction of the country," he told Malaysiakini.

Even Pakatan leaders have concurred that it would be a catastrophe for the opposition coalition if Anwar fails to win the by-election, declaring, "Anwar is our captain. If he falls, the Pakatan ship will sink."

Permatang Pauh has been an interesting seat since the 1969 general election because no victorious candidate has kept it safe for more than one term, except for Anwar and his wife, Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail.

In 1969, then Alliance candidate Mohd Nor Bakar defeated PAS candidate Musa Mohd Yatim and in 1974, BN's Ariffin Md Daud won a three-cornered fight against Pekemas' Abu Bakar Murni and Malaysian People's Socialist Party's (PSRM) Baharuddin Ibrahim.

Ariffin then lost to PAS' Zabidi Ali in 1978.

In 1982, Anwar won a three-cornered fight against Zabidi and DAP's Tan Ah Huat and since then, the constituency, which comprises 60 percent Muslim voters, has been Anwar's political bastion.

Incidentally, Anwar's father Ibrahim Abdul Rahman held the seat for Umno in the 60s for one term.

Who can take on the opposition stalwart?

In keeping with the political reality, BN is hoping to slash the losing margin against the opposition premier-designate, rather than an unlikely victory.

permatang pauh past election results 060808The coalition has tacitly conceded that an Anwar victory is inevitable in his home ground, with a BN leader going as far as saying that Anwar "will win hands down".

This is the main reason behind Umno's prolonged delay in identifying the right candidate - one with a charismatic, non-controversial and clean personality to steal a chunk of Anwar's votes.

Among Umno politicians touted as possible candidates are Permatang division chief Abdul Jalil Abdul Majid, former division deputy chief Ahmad Saad, Seberang Jaya state assemblyperson Arif Shah Omar Shah, state Umno treasurer Zainal Abidin Osman and former PKR Youth chief Mohd Ezam Mohd Nor.

Sivamurugan suggested that Ahmad would fit the bill, but Umno sources said the former deputy rural development minister and Nibong Tebal MP Zainal is the favourite to face Anwar, followed closely by Ariff Shah.

"Zainal has the ministerial experience, credentials, clean and charismatic personality and multi-racial outlook to be an ideal candidate to take on the PKR strongman.

"He is capable of pulling off an upset win," said Umno insiders, acknowledging that BN is the underdog this time.

Umno is likely to know its candidate when party deputy president Najib Abdul Razak meets Penang state and division leaders in a closed-door meeting in Seberang Jaya tomorrow.

Currently, BN will consider it a psychological win if Anwar does not match the 13,398 vote margin secured by PKR president Wan Azizah over BN's Pirdaus Ismail in the March general election.

A reduced majority for Anwar would give a timely boost to the coalition's flagging popularity, said Sivamurugan, adding that it would provide a chance for Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to restore public confidence in the administration.

He said the premier could use the psychological morale booster in his home state to press for strong pro-active policies to arrest political uncertainty and restore the confidence of the public and investors in the government.

"A win would indeed be a tonic for Abdullah to come up with the correct remedies to stabilise, rejuvenate and revitalise the government, BN and Umno," said the Penang-based academician.

Campaign to 'demonise' Anwar

BN component parties are banking on their members in the constituency to reduce Anwar's majority.

permatang pauh election results 310708In Permatang Pauh, Umno has some 19,000 members, MCA 2,700, MIC 1,900 and PPP 1,042, totaling 24,642.

If all of them were to come out in full force and vote for BN, Malaysians would be in for a shocking result - the unthinkable could happen.

"Giant killing feats have happened before," warned Sivamurugan.

Moreover, expect the turnout to be lower as the Election Commission has set polling on a working day. Many workers and out-of-towners may not be able take time-off to vote. This is likely to affect Anwar's winning majority.

Given this, Anwar's camp has warned supporters not to take an easy victory for granted.

There too is the sodomy charge against the opposition candidate which is bound to be a major election issue.

Anwar's strategists are yet unsure what impact the allegations initiated by the PKR de facto leader's 'ex-coffee boy' Mohd Saiful Bukhari Azlan, have, especially among the Malays.

In Taman Pauh last weekend, Anwar told a rally that he does not have the slightest clue of BN's campaign strategy but was sure it would be a "systematic character assassination campaign" on him.

Umno is expected to embark on a large-scale anti-Anwar crusade during the 10-day campaign period between nomination day on Aug 16 and polling day, while its BN partners carry out door-to-door and whisper campaigns to discredit Anwar and woo non-Muslim voters.

Some Pakatan leaders are even expecting BN to unveil concocted photographs of Anwar and Saiful, and are ready to counter them.

Since the by-election result could be affected by public perception on Anwar's character, personality and leadership qualities, Pakatan is working tirelessly to convince constituents, especially the senior folks, that the sodomy allegations are part of an Umno political conspiracy to demonise Anwar.

Anwar is widely touted by them to possess the vital experience, wisdom, vision and charisma to be the right man at the right time to take over the government.