

Rivals: Anwar in for a 'helluva' fight
Malaysiakini.com
Aug 13, 2008
Athi Veerangan

Barisan Nasional may start as the underdog in the upcoming Permatang Pauh by-election, but it plans to pull out all stops and give opposition icon Anwar Ibrahim the fight of his political life once campaigning officially begins on Saturday.
MCPX

Although, BN has yet to name their candidate, the Umno-led ruling coalition has finalised a two-pronged campaign strategy aimed at attacking Anwar both as a man and politician.

ezam nallakaruppan seberang jaya penang umno event 130808 02 "We will convince the voters that Anwar is an American stooge (baruah Amerika) who had forsaken the principles of the nation's founding fathers to achieve his premiership goal," Umno member Ezam Mohd Noor told Malaysiakini.

A former political secretary of the de facto PKR leader, Ezam has been tasked to personally lead a 100-man youth team to convince Permatang Pauh voters that "a vote for Anwar is a vote for disaster".

But Ezam, who promised to expose Anwar as a self-serving politician obsessed with becoming the next prime minister, indicated he would not be fielded by Umno to take on his former mentor.

Nomination day for the Permatang Pauh seat is on Aug 16, while polling day is set for Aug 26, a Tuesday.

Already, there is talk the Penang state government led by DAP, a member of Anwar's opposition Pakatan Rakyat alliance, may declare that weekday a holiday to get voters to come out in full force.

'Ugly, dirty and deprecating' campaign

The Permatang Pauh by-election is closely watched as a litmus test of Anwar's popularity, although some political observers say it is just as crucial an acid test for Umno, the backbone of BN.

Of late Umno, which has called the shots in the country since independence, has been increasingly hit by scandals involving corruption and abuse of power.

Infighting too is rampant as it heads towards internal party elections later this year.

With so much at stake, insiders say Umno will definitely not be able to rely on just issue-based politics to beat Anwar.

Local party members predict that the campaign will be "ugly, dirty and deprecating" and Anwar can expect a 'helluva' fight.

anwar ibrahim pc 080808 02 "Anwar is in for a hard time," Umno Penang secretary Azhar

Ibrahim told Malaysiakini.

Permatang Pauh, a constituency near the village where Anwar was born, is widely regarded as an Anwar stronghold.

It is a quiet town with a voter bank of 58,459. Of this number of registered voters, 40 percent are aged between 21 and 40, while another 25 percent are aged between 41 and 50.

Umno believes that Malay voters, who make up 69 percent of Permatang Pauh constituents, are split in their support. This means that they, and Anwar as well, will have to court the 19,000-odd non-Malay votes for victory.

Courting the non-Malays

As such, the choice of candidate will be crucial in swinging key votes, said local Umno leaders.

They believe on the latest shortlist are Seberang Jaya state assemblyperson Ariff Shah Omar Shah and party state treasurer and former deputy minister of rural development Zainal Abidin Osman.

"Both Ariff and Zainal have multiracial and youthful appeal. They are well-liked beyond communal boundaries, are enterprising and untainted clean personalities," said one of the insiders interviewed by Malaysiakini.

permatang pauh past election results 060808Ariff Shah's ace in the sleeve is that, like Ezam, he is familiar with Anwar's political style, having served as Permatang Pauh Youth chief when Anwar headed the Umno division there.

Meanwhile, Zainal is said to be a relative of Umno president and premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. "Zainal can carry the Umno-BN torch and take the fight to Anwar," said a supporter.

Current Permatang Pauh Umno chief Abdul Jalil Abdul Majid and former division deputy chief Ahmad Saad are said to have been dropped from the latest shortlist although they were earlier considered to take on the tough task of turning the tables on Anwar in his home turf.

50-50 chance

Even in Umno circles, Anwar who is a former deputy prime minister as well as former Umno deputy president is seen as always being a step ahead of his political rivals, thanks to his 16 years of experience in the BN before his shock sacking by ex-premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 1998.

Still, Azhar believes BN has a 50-50 chance. The coalition will be deploying some 5,000 party workers to Permatang Pauh specially to shore up support for its campaign there.

"Never, never underestimate our strength," Azhar said. "Even if we don't win, we will reduce Anwar's majority."

Whatever the outcome, Malaysians can expect an avalanche of scandalous issues to be raised by both Umno-BN as well as Anwar's own Pakatan Rakyat coalition as they battle tooth-and-nail in what is already being touted to be the mother of all by-elections.

Political analysts expect Anwar, a gifted orator, to stand on high moral ground and club the Umno-BN on issues of corruption and abuse of power.

Umno-BN, on the other hand, are unlikely to let Anwar get away without playing their trump card - his sodomy charge by former aide Mohd Saiful Bukhari Azlan.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.

Source : <http://www.malysiakini.com/news/87719>