

BN's Arif: 'Who can defeat Anwar? I can'
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Beh Lih Yi

It is not rocket science to figure out between Anwar Ibrahim and Arif Shah Omar Shah - the two prospective candidates for the Permatang Pauh by-election - who is the Goliath, but the seeming 'underdog' has his slingshot ready for an improbable win.
MCPX

"I am confident of winning even if not by an overwhelming majority," Arif Shah - the Barisan Nasional candidate-designate - declared last night, an opening shot in his bid to wrest the seat from PKR in the Aug 26 by-election.

arif shah omar shah bn umno candidate for permatang pauh by election 140808 12He added that Anwar - instead of contesting in Permatang Pauh - should be contesting in Kuala Lumpur since the PKR leader was now Klang Valley based.

He told reporters this after he was named last night as the ruling coalition's choice for the by-election at the ruling coalition's election machinery launch by Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak.

In the March general election, PKR's Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail defended her seat with a thumping 13,398-majority, downing BN's Pirdaus Ismail for the second consecutive time - retaining the Anwar family's 26-year stranglehold of the seat.

A surprised candidate

The 52-year-old Arif Shah - who is also the Seberang Jaya state assemblyperson - said his selection was unexpected.

arif shah omar shah bn umno candidate for permatang pauh by election 140808 01He broke into tears hearing the announcement, and his supporters were up on their feet applauding him. It is not BN's norm to select a by-election candidate who is already holding office- in a state assembly or Parliament.

The candidate nevertheless took the podium without haste and declared his readiness for the uphill battle, to the approval of the 1,500-odd BN supporters gathered.

In his short speech - punctuated with Mandarin sentences - he asked voters to give BN a chance and pledged to serve all communities equally.

The Umno man, popular among locals, is known for his constituency services and can speak fluent Mandarin, an advantage in BN's bid to woo back Chinese voters.

He successfully defended his state seat in the last general election, whilst his Umno colleagues faltered.

Seberang Jaya is one of three state seats under the Permatang Pauh parliamentary seat. The other two - Permatang Pasir and Penanti - are presently held by PAS and PKR respectively.

Later, Najib denied that the decision to pick Arif Shah as a clever strategy to swing Chinese

votes back, saying: "We want to swing all votes, not just the Chinese votes."

'Backstabbing' within Umno?

Apart from having to contend with Anwar's popularity in Permatang Pauh, the other challenge to Arif Shah is to manage the local Umno division's internal politics - and possible squabbles.

There are fears of 'backstabbing' the candidate in lieu of the various competing factions for power at the division election, to be held somewhere between Oct 9 and Nov 9.

Vying for the coveted division chief post are the trio of Arif Shah, current chief Abdul Jalil Abdul Majid and his deputy, Pirdaus.

Division leadership contests are highly charged in overall party election years - as they determine the voting delegates at the general assembly, to be held in December.

arif shah omar shah bn umno candidate for permatang pauh by election 140808 14Which is why Najib, who is also Umno deputy president, appeared rather cautious in his choice of words before announcing the candidate last night and repeatedly reminded party members to set aside internal politics while campaigning.

He implored for unity and apologised if the chosen candidate did not meet everyone's expectations.

The deputy prime minister made it clear that the candidate choice has no bearing on the divisional election.

"When we name this candidate, it doesn't mean we are also endorsing him as the division chief.

permatang pauh 2008 results for state and state seats 140808"The divisional politics should be set aside. In our mind, there should be only thing that is to strive for our victory on Aug 26," he said to the applause from those present.

"If everyone stays loyal and support BN, the impossible might just happen this time," Najib alluding to the ruling coalition's chances in winning the PKR's stronghold.

Among those present last night include Umno secretary-general Tengku Adnan Mansor, information chief Muhd Muhammad Taib, Youth chief Hishammuddin Hussein, Gerakan acting president Dr Koh Tsu Koon and MCA Penang chief Liow Tiong Lai.

The Permatang Pauh seat fell vacant after its incumbent Wan Azizah vacated it on July 31 to allow her husband Anwar to contest as a way back to Parliament.

Nomination is on Aug 16, this coming Saturday.

There are 58,459 voters in the constituency - of which 490 are postal voters - as of July 31.