

Curtain comes down on Permatang Pauh
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It's time to hit the ballot boxes, as the curtains come down at midnight tonight on one of the most intense campaigning ever experienced in the by-election fight that has gripped Permatang Pauh residents during the past 10 days.
MCPX

Malaysians across the country will be eagerly waiting to see how the constituency's 58,459 registered voters decide on Tuesday, Aug 26.

Some say it is not just a day to decide who goes past the pole first, but a D-day to determine the next direction for the country.

Whichever it is, for many observers the fiercely-fought by-election was only about two things - opposition icon Anwar Ibrahim and his ambition to become prime minister.

permatang pauh by election nomination day 160808 candidates 2By 8pm Tuesday night, Malaysians will know whether the Permatang Pauh folks have heeded the PKR supremo's call to trigger changes or stick with the status quo.

Permatang Pauh, which encompasses the state seats of Seberang Jaya (22,680 voters), Permatang Pasir (20,450) and Penanti (15,421 voters), has 40 percent of its electorate aged between 21 and 40 years old; 25 percent between 41 and 50; 19 percent between 51 and 60; while 16 percent are above 60.

Women make up 51 percent. Malay voters form 69 percent, Chinese, 25 percent while Indians, six percent.

The by-election, dubbed the 'mother of all by-elections', is a three-cornered fight between Anwar, Barisan Nasional candidate Arif Shah Omar Shah and Akim president Hanafi Hamat.

BN's strategy

Anwar's main opponent is however Arif Shah, the affable Mandarin-speaking assemblyman for Seberang Jaya.

Hanafi, from the little-known Islamic party Akim, would be lucky if he can keep his deposit.

arif shah bn candidate permatang pauh by election walkabout 210808 03BN lived up to its reputation of being a formidable and ruthless campaign machinery, carrying out a two-pronged strategy that attacked Anwar both as a politician and a man.

Anwar supporters have pointed out at least 20 strategies deployed by BN in its crusade to 'stop Anwar at all costs'.

Some of these include scheduling the polling day on a working day, although the opposition-led Penang state government has since declared it a public holiday to boost voter turnout; charging Anwar for sodomising his former aide Mohd Saiful Bukhari Azlan a day

after the Elections Commission announced the by-election date; the non-stop screening of a video of Mohd Saiful swearing on the Quran that he had indeed been sodomised by Anwar; the startling revelations by former PKR men - Mohd Ezam Mohd Nor and KS Nallakaruppan - against their ex-leader; and the distribution of anonymous leaflets, banners and posters carrying taunts against the Pakatan Rakyat leader.

BN critics also slammed the coalition's allocation of money to vernacular schools, temples and mosques; the earlier-than-expected lowering of fuel prices and also Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's swearing in a mosque that he was not involved in the high-profile murder case of a Mongolian woman.

Contrasting campaign styles

Despite the bombardment, the Pakatan Rakyat machinery did its best to maintain its multi-racial focus. It held nightly ceramahs and went on door-to-door visits around the constituency.

Pakatan colleagues DAP and PAS too came to lend a hand in the campaign, while several NGOs handed out cash-aid to single mothers and flood victims during PKR functions.

Both Barisan and Pakatan supporters hurled non-stop accusations at each other throughout the 10-day campaign. BN was accused of manipulating the mainstream media, utilising government machinery and resorting to money politics.

In retaliation, PKR volunteers were lambasted by the BN for being unruly, aggressive and violent.

Each time BN launched its main weapon against Anwar, which was to highlight the sodomy charges against him, PR supporters rushed to 'damage-control' and according to a local blogger, this may be the reason why the alleged sexual scandal did not have that much impact.

"This could affect Anwar's majority but not enough to deny him victory," said a local blogger Amiruddin Ahmad.

However, it was the startling revelation from the imam of FT Mosque, Ramlang Porigi, that he had been instructed by Najib's top aide to witness Mohd Saiful's oath-taking and that the latter had committed two mistakes during the ceremony that is likely to carry the most weight with doubters and fence-sitters.

The overwhelming favourite

BN's plan to use Arif Shah's ability to speak Mandarin and Hokkien to swing Chinese voters won them some support, but observers think the community is likely to stick with Anwar.

They expect the Indians to also vote for Anwar, as his Pakatan alliance is perceived to have done more for the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf), an influential organisation within the close-knit community, than the Barisan. anwar ibrahim ceramah in tok kandu permatang pauh by election 220808 06

The weekend arrests of nine Hindraf activists too will not augur well for Arif and could even sway a few more minority votes towards Anwar.

The Permatang Pauh seat fell vacant after PKR president Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail resigned to pave the way for her husband Anwar to make his parliamentary comeback after a 10-year absence.

In the March general elections, Wan Azizah garnered 30,348 votes to defeat Pirdaus Ismail (BN-Umno), who secured only 16,950 votes. Her majority was 13,398 votes.

While ad-hoc surveys, intelligence reports and bookies odds concur that Anwar will win, the main question that remains is whether he can better, or at least equal, Wan Azizah's majority.

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