

Umno to zoom in on Nizar's defiance of sultan
Malaysiakini.com
Mar 29, 09

Thousands of government and opposition supporters converged Sunday on a sleepy district in Perak, for an electoral clash that will test the new leadership of Najib Razak.

The political temperature is already running high in the state, where the Perak sultan in January ordered the opposition to cede control of the state assembly to the coalition, after defections upset the delicate balance of power.

Some 15,000 opposition supporters and 5,000 from the ruling coalition turned out today at the nearby town of Taiping to nominate their candidates, putting on a rowdy display as they beat on drums, yelled chants and waved party banners.

In Bukit Gantang, which with its hills and morning mists is a popular tourism destination, the roads were ablaze with party posters and flags, while police riot trucks and water cannon vehicles were deployed at strategic points.

The government is campaigning heavily on the opposition's defiance of the Perak sultan's order to surrender power - touching on the rights of the Malay rulers which is a sensitive topic in Malaysia.

"The opposition has insulted and defied the institution of the sultan in the state, and people must vote out anyone who insults the monarchy," government supporter Zek Mohamad Shalby told AFP outside the nomination centre.

Opposition supporters meanwhile yelled slogans linking Najib to a murdered Mongolian woman who was the mistress of one of his aides. The new leader has repeatedly denied any involvement in the case. "I'm very confident of winning," said PAS candidate Mohamad Nizar Jamaluddin who was Perak's chief minister until the ouster, which is now in limbo as the two sides trade parliamentary and legal manoeuvres.

"We are fighting for democracy and true freedom and it is going to happen here in Bukit Gantang, and we are going to say bye-bye to injustice," he told reporters at the nomination centre.

Nizar is facing Umno's Ismail Safian and Independent candidate Kamarul Ramizu Idris in the three-way fight.

Can BN claw back support?

The Barisan Nasional coalition is hoping that the installation of Najib Abdul Razak as president of Umno last week will help it gain support in Bukit Gantang, where a seat in the national assembly is up for grabs.

Bukit Gantang is a microcosm of the country's multicultural population, with 60 percent Muslim Malays, 30 percent ethnic Chinese and 10 percent Indians.

The result here will be seen as a sign of whether the coalition has clawed back support since humiliating general elections a year ago when it lost a third of parliamentary seats and five of the 13 states to the opposition.

Najib has promised to overhaul Umno, which has dominated Malaysian politics for half a century, and root out the corruption, cronyism and infighting that has alienated voters.

His new deputy Muhyiddin Yassin, who kicked off the campaign for Bukit Gantang, admitted that the vote

would be a testing ground for the fledgling administration.

"All by-elections are important, especially one that is done after the process of transition of leadership... we want to tell the people this is a team that means business," he told reporters.

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