

Exit Pak Lah, Dr Mahathir returns to campaign trail

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Muda Mohd Noor

Former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad has steered clear of the elections which took place during the five-year reign of his successor-turned-nemesis Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

In 2008, the 83-year-old statesman made an exception and canvassed for votes when his youngest son Mukhriz contested for the Jerlun parliamentary seat in Kedah.

Apart from this, Mahathir chose to watch the ensuing battles from the sidelines while his hard-hitting comments against Abdullah served as an indirect endorsement for the opposition.

On certain occasions, the grand wizard of Barisan Nasional had openly called on voters not to back the ruling coalition.

After playing a pivotal role in expediting Abdullah's early exit and ensuring the installation of his protege Najib Abdul Razak as prime minister which is slated to take place this Friday, Mahathir has decided to lend his support once again to the coalition that he led for more than two decades.

Confirming this, Bukit Gantang Umno division secretary Jamal Idris told Malaysiakini today that Mahathir would be in the constituency on Sunday - two days after Najib takes over the reins.

He is scheduled to meet voters in either Taman Kaya or Taman Kota Jaya to campaign for BN's Ismail Saffian who is facing ousted Perak menteri besar Mohd Nizar Jamaluddin and independent Kamarul Ramizu Idris on April 7.

Mohd Nizar is said to be the hot favourite to sweep the Bukit Gantang parliamentary seat in the upcoming by-election which is also being touted as a referendum for the Najib-masterminded power grab in Perak.

A boost for Umno

With the odds stacked against them, Umno is hoping that the presence of Mahathir would tip the scales in BN's favour.

Jamal said Mahathir had yet to finalise his activities in Bukit Gantang. "We'll know about the timetable soon," he added.

Meanwhile, Umno Bukit Gantang division committee member Mohamad Saadin Yusof welcomed Mahathir's participation and was confident that it would provide a boost to Umno supporters.

"They (Umno members) who did not vote for the party, would vote for BN again. It is certain that Mahathir's presence will bolster our strength," he said when contacted.

Last May, Mahathir had quit Umno in protest of Abdullah's leadership.

However, the former party president last week said he would now return to the fold 'with certain conditions'.

PAS unperturbed

In a related development, PAS said it was not perturbed by Mahathir's arrival as he no longer possessed

a wide influence.

Furthermore, Perak PAS Youth chief Norazli Musa said the Islamic party's candidate also enjoys the support of non-Malays as well.

He said Mahathir could only exert his influence over a small number of Malay voters.

Norazli added that PAS only needed about 50 percent of Malay votes to win the contest. "With the support of non-Malay voters, Mahathir's presence would not have an impact."

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