

Abdullah puts focus on home turf as rivals scent blood over ethnic grievances

ET- 7/3/2008

MALAYSIA ELECTION

Penang, a state dominated by Indian and Chinese minorities, is a key battleground in tomorrow's poll, writes John Burton

Abdullah Badawi looks relaxed as he eats breakfast and chats to a visitor in the suite of a hotel close to his parliamentary constituency in Penang.

But the fact that he has spent most of his time in his home state during the current election campaign, instead of flying around the country shoring up support elsewhere, suggests that the Malaysian prime minister may be more worried than he appears.

The north-western Malaysian state, a centre of the nation's electronics industry and a prime tourist attraction thanks to the colonial architecture of its capital, Georgetown, has emerged as the key battleground in the general elections to be held tomorrow. Mr Abdullah's

National Front government, which has held power since 1957, is certain to be re-elected. But attention will focus on the size of its margin of victory, and whether it can come close to winning 90 per cent of parliamentary seats as it did at the last election in 2004 depends on what happens in Penang.

Its importance lies in the fact that it is only one of Malaysia's 13 states whose population is dominated by the country's ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities at a time when they are increasingly complaining about the government's long-standing preferential treatment for the nation's ethnic Malay majority.

The discontent in Penang also reflects other issues that have undermined Mr Abdullah's popularity, including rising inflation and crime rates. "It's like [support for Barack] Obama in the US, we want change," says a newsstand vendor in Georgetown's Little India section.

"Penang represents a big challenge for the government. It is independent-minded, largely urbanised and industrialised, and the base for many civil society

groups," says Anil Netto of Aliran, a Penang-based social reform group.

A senior aide to Mr Abdullah agrees. "Penang politics can be volatile and the ground is difficult to read. If the government loses a lot of votes it would be embarrassing for the prime minister since it is his home state."

The loss of the state government would be seen as a devastating blow to Mr Abdullah. The National

'Penang politics can be volatile and the ground is difficult to read'

Front controls 12 of the 13 states and appears confident of gaining the remaining hold-out, Kelantan, now ruled by the conservative Islamic Party of Malaysia (Pas). But the loss of Penang would negate that victory.

The opposition is scenting blood. The ethnic Chinese-affiliated Democratic Action party, the biggest opposition group, has nominated most of its top leaders to stand in Penang in an attempt to

attract votes. The opposition holds five of Penang's 13 parliamentary seats and most analysts believe it could take more this time.

The prime minister says Penang will benefit from his economic policies, including a new "economic corridor" that will improve transport links with the rural hinterland. "Penang will see a revival as a transport hub because more agricultural products will be shipped there as a result of the corridor," Mr Abdullah told the Financial Times this week.

The National Front is warning the state's minorities that they risk losing influence if they vote against the coalition's junior parties that represent their interests in the government.

An unstated reason that Mr Abdullah is spending so much time in Penang is that he may see the polls as an opportunity to try to end the political career of his arch-rival Anwar Ibrahim, the main opposition leader.

The two men, whose home towns are only miles apart in Penang, have vied for power ever since they were rising leaders in the United Malays National Organisation (Umno), the dominant

party in the National Front government.

Mr Anwar appeared to eclipse Mr Abdullah when he was selected as deputy prime minister in 1993. But then he fell out with Mahathir Mohamad, the then prime minister, in 1998 and was sacked and jailed. Mr Abdullah was chosen to replace him and later became prime minister in 2003. Mr Abdullah's constituency is next door to that of Mr Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, who has held the seat since 1999 for the opposition People's Justice party, founded by her husband. He is barred from politics until April because of his controversial criminal conviction.

But "the election is crucial for both men", says Yang Razali Kassim at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. "If the government performs badly, Abdullah's leadership, already weak, will be openly challenged by Umno rivals at the party elections later this year. For Anwar, the opposition's performance will determine whether it is the end of the road for him or a new dawn."