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# All parties have a lot to prove in twin polls

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## DEFINING MOMENT:

Outcome will determine future of new players in political landscape



BARADAN KUPPUSAMY

**T**HE twin by-elections in Sungai Besar and Kuala Kangsar, which entered their final lap before voters go to the polls today, will be a defining moment for the future of Umno and Malay politics.

The outcome of the polls will decide the future of new players in the political landscape — Parti Amanah Negara (PAN) and its ally, DAP, and former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, with his “Save Malaysia” campaign.

Ironically, Dr Mahathir has managed to rope in his arch-enemy, DAP, and, even worse, parts of PKR, to support his campaign, aimed at toppling Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

Dr Mahathir’s success in getting PKR deputy president Datuk Seri Azmin Ali and his supporters to support his campaign has sparked fierce opposition within PKR.

Even PKR *ketua umum* Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has tried to influence the outcome by writing letters from prison, warning PKR leaders against working with Dr Mahathir.

The two opposition parties — PKR and DAP — are participating because they are seeking to ride on Dr Mahathir’s coat-tails to further their similar aims: dethroning Najib.

While he has been successful in getting their support, Dr Mahathir’s natural allies in Umno have forsaken him in the twin by-elections.

Former deputy prime minister



Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, Dr Mahathir’s son and former Kedah menteri besar Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir, and former minister and incumbent Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Mohd Shafie Apdal, who were once all very vocal, have suddenly gone silent.

Not only did they not campaign like Dr Mahathir in the by-elections, but Shafie made a U-turn, turning up in Sungai Besar on nomination day in support of Barisan Nasional.

All these events indicate that Najib has managed to have his way in Umno, of which he is president. Only a few Umno branch leaders are protesting against him.

If BN wins big in both by-elections, it will indicate that Dr Mahathir’s campaign has lost steam.

“It will be difficult for him to revive his campaign after such defeats. It will indicate that the people have rejected him,” said a political analyst, who declined to be named.

“Dr Mahathir will have to face the consequences of defeat,” he said, adding that any positive outcome for BN would be negative for Dr Mahathir.

“It will show that Umno, Malays and the people have rejected his message.”

The two by-elections also see Pas fighting for its political life against a determined onslaught from newcomer PAN. Pas is fighting hard to emerge runner-up behind BN.

“It does not want to end up last. It wants to show its supporters that

Pas, hudud and its Islamic agendas are all very relevant,” said a Pas leader, adding that if the party was defeated and emerged third, then it was very likely that more Pas members might defect to PAN.

As it is now, PAN comprises about 20 per cent former Pas supporters, although it could still attract some fence-sitters.

If Pas is defeated in its race with PAN, the possibility remains for Pas to be forced into its “backwater” status, with its Islamic message effective only in Malay heartland states.

It is undeniable that Pas expanded dramatically after cooperating with Pakatan Rakyat in 2008, but strangely, the new coalition, Pakatan Harapan, has evicted Pas, the biggest Malay party after Umno.

Pas is now in a dance with Umno.

Another message derived from the twin by-elections is the relevance of hudud in Malay society.

Will Malays rally to the hudud banner, as envisaged by Pas, and vote for the party, or will they vote for BN, which stands for pragmatism, moderation, consensus and justice for all races?

Hudud has captivated conservative Malays for some five decades, and the twin by-elections provide an ideal chance for Malay voters to make a clear choice between syariah law

or the current legal set-up, which has worked well, warts and all.

And, the by-elections will also indicate whether Chinese voters, who make up 31 per cent of the population in Sungai Besar and 24 per cent in Kuala Kangsar, buy the MCA and Gerakan argument that PAN and Pas have the same DNA, in that they both support hudud.

Since PAN is relying heavily on the Chinese vote, their campaign aims to draw Chinese voters away from the party. In this, they are tussling with their traditional enemy, DAP, which created PAN.

A lot is, thus, riding on these by-elections for BN, Pas, PAN and DAP, and, above all, Dr Mahathir.



Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad