

In Johor, Pakatan partners see pitfalls of PKR swagger
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By Shannon Teoh

JOHOR BARU, Nov 25 — PKR begins a weekend assault on the Umno bastion of Johor today intent on taking over the state but its coalition partners fear that the move will fuel concern among voters, especially the Malays, that the state Pakatan Rakyat (PR) lacks top-calibre leaders from the dominant community.

De facto leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim will outline the party's plans to win the state in a general election expected soon when addressing the main wing tomorrow during its national congress in the luxurious Pulau Springs Resort here.

Abdul Ghani is pounding the pavement at least four days a week in 'hot seats' across Johor. — Pictures by Choo Choy May

"That will definitely be the message. When Anwar addresses the delegates he will elaborate on why we chose Johor," PKR secretary-general Saifuddin Nasution said.

But state assemblymen from PAS and the DAP fear PKR's confidence may backfire, noting how Johor PKR chief Datuk Chua Jui Meng was demonised in August last year after a banner — which PR says was an Umno ploy — was displayed proclaiming him as the coalition's menteri besar candidate.

"It's clear that if we win it will mostly be from Chinese support. After the accusations of being a 'Chinese government' in Penang and Perak, it is easy for Umno to attack us by asking who will be MB," said PAS's Sungai Abong assemblyman Dr Sheikh Ibrahim Salleh.

DAP state chief Dr Boo Cheng Hau also agreed with the PAS state committee member that it was more important to concentrate on making gains.

"We must try not to fall into that trap and dodge the question of MB-ship and forming the state government. Our strategy is not to alarm voters but work on issues," the Skudai assemblyman said, adding that PR is on track to add seven MPs from the state.

Dr Sheikh Ibrahim said most of the opposition's support is expected to come from the Chinese.

Anwar and PKR, however, have bigger plans with the charismatic opposition leader seeking to reinforce his message in eight of at least 15 ceramahs the party has lined up over the weekend, which will feature at least 21 party leaders.

The Malaysian Insider understands that Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman was jittery enough to summon district officers yesterday morning to brief them on "limiting the impact of the ceramahs."

"MB is taking PKR's presence this weekend seriously," a source said, noting that this was on top of Abdul Ghani's already hectic pre-election schedule that sees him pounding the pavement at least four days a week in "hot seats" across the state.

"He's been on the ground in all these seats the opposition thinks it can win," said a top

member of the state government of the mentri besar's visits to Gelang Patah, Muar, Kluang, Tebrau, Kulai and Pulai.

Dr Boo said it was more important to concentrate on making gains.

Local leaders from all three PR components acknowledge that there is currently no strong leader in Johor where it won just one federal and six state seats out of 26 and 56 respectively on offer in Election 2008.

"We have no one since Abdul Razak Ahmad," said a PKR division chief, referring to the late state chief.

The Malaysian Insider understands that Pontian-born PAS vice-president Salahuddin Ayub may be forced to relinquish his Kubang Kerian federal seat and return to Johor.

Machang MP Saifuddin said the party's confidence was "guided by analyses and reports" from Chua and strategy director Rafizi Ramli.

But when asked about an MB candidate, he said "of course we are preparing for elections so obviously we have a candidate."

"Do we have to answer attacks? Whichever PR party, the voters can look at all the capable candidates," he said.

Johor was mostly unaffected from the March 2008 "tsunami" that swept PR into power in five states and denied Barisan Nasional (BN) its customary two-thirds majority in Parliament.

The coalition needs an additional 30 MPs this time around to take Putrajaya and should it succeed, Nusajaya may become a moot issue.

Ironically, PKR's partners are hoping that the battle for the state does not hamper the war for the nation.

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