

To win big, BN likely to ditch seat-sharing formula
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KUALA LUMPUR, March 11 — Barisan Nasional (BN) is looking to dump its seat-sharing formula among component parties in order to regain its two-thirds parliamentary majority and some of the states lost in Election 2008, say sources familiar with Datuk Seri Najib Razak's strategies for the coming general election.

The Malaysian Insider understands the BN chairman's constant refrain of "winnable candidates" will apply to all component parties as Najib wants the candidate with the best chance of winning to be fielded no matter which party had kept the seat previously.

"It doesn't matter if it is an Umno or MCA or MIC seat, Najib wants the best candidate for that seat," a source told The Malaysian Insider, referring to the prime minister's directive that he will have a last say on every candidate.

Leaders of the 13-member ruling coalition has always expressed the need to respect the seat-sharing formula inherited from its predecessor Alliance, that first ruled the country from independence in 1957. But the results of Election 2008 have led to a rethink of the formula as most seats have a majority Malay electorate who now have a bigger choice of Malay majority parties — Umno, PAS and PKR.

The coalition won only 140 out of the 222 federal seats in the March 8, 2008 elections apart from losing Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor to Pakatan Rakyat (PR). It won back Perak in 2009 when three PR lawmakers quit to become independents supporting BN.

Ministers and other BN politicians have told The Malaysian Insider that they have received enough hints and instructions from the prime minister in recent weeks to suggest that the "trusted formula of seat-sharing" between component parties will have to give way to new political realities.

"The seat sharing formula isn't going to work anymore as far as Najib is concerned. He wants to win big and that means putting winnable candidates," one minister told The Malaysian Insider on condition of anonymity.

The Malaysian Insider reported last month that former prime minister Tun Abdullah Badawi has been asked to stand again in his Kepala Batas parliamentary seat, an indication that Najib wants to keep the best candidates he has to ensure a bigger victory.

It is understood that veterans such as Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah in Gua Musang and former MCA president Datuk Seri Ong Tee Keat in Pandan are expected to remain as BN candidates despite their involvement in Amanah, a pressure group seeking to rekindle multi-racialism in the country which some blame has been lost under BN rule.

BN's move to end the seat-sharing formula can be traced back to an Umno closed-door retreat in Janda Baik in October 2009, six months after Najib took power, when the party

politicians expressed disappointment with the power-sharing formula that led to losses in Election 2008.

During the rare three-day gathering of Umno divisions, a common refrain heard was that Umno should be less generous in giving up Malay-majority seats to representatives of MCA, MIC, Gerakan and other component parties.

The general view among division chiefs was that the component parties were much weaker than Umno and would not be able to swing votes from the non-Malays or the Malays.

In contrast, a strong Umno was better placed to win in Malay-majority seats.

The Malaysian Insider understood then that Najib and senior party officials who attended the retreat — aimed at boosting the morale of grassroots leaders — were non-committal on the request for Umno to be less charitable in seat allocation with BN component parties.

Several Umno officials who attended the retreat told The Malaysian Insider then that the most important consideration should be to field a candidate who can enhance the possibility of victory at the next general election.

“If a seat has 55 or 60 per cent Malay voters, it makes sense to field an Umno candidate. In the last election, we gave seats in Perak and Selangor to other parties and they were not able to deliver.

“These parties still have internal issues and will not be able to deliver the votes from the non-Malays. So it will be better if an Umno candidate is fielded to try and get the maximum possible support from Malay voters,” said an official then, who requested anonymity due to the retreat being a closed-door affair.

During the retreat, officials were also in agreement that Umno’s/BN’s fortunes rested on the ruling party strengthening its standing among Malay voters — a backhanded acknowledgment that it was not pinning much hopes on getting support from non-Malays at the next general election.

And with some 58 per cent of the new 1.9 million voters in the electoral rolls being Malays, BN is realistic that its chances lie with the Malay majority and at the expense of its other allies, says an Umno lawmaker.

“We need to be real about our chances among the electorate, among the demographics. That means a new way of selecting candidates, based on merits, not just because the party has had the seat forever,” he added.

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