

BN Has Upper Hand In Upcoming Polls, Still Long Way To Go For Pakatan, Say Analysts
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KUALA LUMPUR, March 18 (Bernama) -- As the 13th General Election (GE) draws nearer, questions are being frequently asked on its likely outcome.

Political circles are now abuzz with pre-poll analyses and forecasts as Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Rakyat (PR) step up their campaigning.

In the last GE held on 8, 2008, BN lost more than one-third of parliamentary seats. Some people even think that there is a remote possibility that the BN may lose its grip on the federal government in the next election.

After four years, with changes in leadership and the implementation of various affirmative projects under the aegis of 1Malaysia and the Government Transformation Programme by the BN-led federal government, most political analysts believe that the BN's chances of retaining the federal government are still high, with some even arguing that it might win more seats this time.

"It depends on whom you talk to. If you talk to hardcore supporters from both sides, they will clearly speak for their side's favour. However, it is the neutrals who count, and their votes will be important," says Penang-based political analyst Datuk Cheah See Kian.

The neutrals included about two million new and young voters who were going to vote for the first time and their support would be key to deciding who would take over Putrajaya, he said.

DAP strategist and member of Parliament for Bukit Bendera, Liew Chin Tong, says whether the BN can retain power at the federal level depends on "the middle ground" as he believes that there could be a 10 per cent swing in votes, either for BN or PR.

"It is the middle ground that matters. Every election is a different one involving new personalities, different sentiments, and changing themes. Results from the previous election can only serve as a reference," he said.

Liew explained that there was no denying that a 10 per cent vote swing was huge "which does not always happen but it is not impossible".

BN's national vote share, he said, was 65 per cent in the 1995 general election, 57 per cent in 1999, 64 per cent in 2004, and 51 per cent in 2008.

Between the 1995 and the 1999 elections, its vote share declined by eight per cent while following the 2004 election, it suffered a sharp 13 per cent drop.

"The opposition pact won 83 of the 222 parliamentary seats in the 2008 election. Of the BN's 139 seats, 55 were from Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan while in Peninsular Malaysia, it

won 85 seats over PR's 81," he said, adding that PR obtained 51 per cent of votes in the peninsula.

In the previous election, 54 of PR's 83 seats were won with a majority of less than 10 per cent or referred to as "marginal seats".

But in the next GE, if there is a 10 per cent swing in the BN's favour, PR will be left with only 29 seats.

On the other hand, 56 of BN's 139 seats were won with a majority of less than 10 per cent in 2008, and a 10 per cent swing in PR's favour would severely impact on BN's rule.

"Of the BN's 56 marginal seats, 14 are from Sabah and Sarawak while another 22 are multi-ethnic peninsula seats with less than 70 per cent Malay voters. Of PR's 54 marginal seats, 34 are multi-ethnic peninsula seats," he said, adding that the marginal seats from both BN and PR totalled 110 seats, while 112 seats were needed to win a simple majority in the Dewan Rakyat.

BN, however, is not too worried about its small gains. The coalition says it has been winning 66 per cent to 90 per cent of the parliamentary seats since 1959 without fail, against the backdrop of only 49.3 percent to 65.2 percent of votes.

BN has never won more than two-thirds (66.67 per cent) of popular votes. The closest it ever came to a two-thirds win of the popular votes was in 1995 (65.2 per cent) when it won 84.38 per cent of the seats in Parliament.

The best election for the BN was in 2004 when it won 90 per cent of the seats but with just 63.9 per cent of votes, still less than two-thirds.

The year 1995 was the best for the ruling party in terms of votes (65.2 per cent), but it only won 84.38 per cent of the seats. This means more votes do not actually translate to more seats, and vice versa.

BN Selangor publicity chief Datuk Yap Pian Hon points out that even if a greater number of people turned out to vote and PR secures more votes, there is no guarantee it can form the next federal government.

"It all depends on where you vote. If you are in the urban area, which of course covers the Chinese-majority areas mostly, then the opposition is likely to get most of the votes, but not the seats," he said.

Yap explained that in the 2008 general election, the 82 parliamentary seats won by PR were divided almost equally between the Malays and non-Malays despite the fact that it got almost 90 per cent of Indian votes, 70 per cent of Chinese votes and 50 per cent of Malay votes.

He, however, noted that currently, Indian votes were split 50:50 between BN and PR while it was predicted that there would be a small increase in Chinese votes for the opposition to 80 per cent from the previous 70 per cent.

Any increase in Chinese votes for PR is likely to be offset by a drop in Indian votes for the opposition

"The deciding factor is still Malay votes. More than 60 per cent of voters in this country are Malay. Any increase in Malay votes for BN can make up for the decline in non-Malay votes. In the last election, BN got about 50 per cent of Malay votes."

Whether PR retains its 83 seats in Parliament (now reduced to 76 due to defections), it would still be in the opposition," Yap maintained.

In order to form the next federal government, PR must try to win at least 94 of the 165 seats in Peninsular Malaysia and 18 of the 57 seats in Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan (31 in Sarawak, 25 in Sabah and one in Labuan) -- which may bring it to a simple majority of 112.

"To increase to 94, it would need to win back all the seats it had won previously, including the ones where its elected YBs (elected representatives) left the party. This does not include winning an additional 12 seats in the peninsula and another 18 in Sabah and Sarawak," he said, adding that he did not see any possibility of PR forming the next federal government.

Political observers also agree that the chances of PR winning at least 18 seats in Sabah and Sarawak do not look bright either as it is still bogged down by problems like election machinery, logistics, local leaders and reaching out to rural voters.

Voters in Sabah and Sarawak are also more inclined towards parties that are based locally like BN's components whereas PR has peninsula-based parties.

Political analyst Dr Jeniri Amir of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak feels that the most number of seats that PR could win in Sarawak would be seven to 10, including four "grey" parliamentary seats allocated to SPDP (Mas Gading, Seratok, Baram, Bintulu), and with the possibility of retaining Bandar Kuching and Sibul, and winning Stampin, Sarikei, Lanang and Miri.

In Sabah, he said PR could capture only five parliamentary seats, particularly in Chinese-majority areas like Kudat, Tawau, Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan.

"Overall support for the BN in Sabah and Sarawak is 55 per cent, and for PR 30 per cent, with floating votes of about 15 per cent," he added.

Although PR finds the going to be tough, DAP's Liew is still upbeat in his usual opposition demeanour in that one could not rule out PR forming the next federal government.

"It depends on the magic of campaigning, which can tip the balance," he said, adding that DAP did not know it could win Penang in the 2008 GE until a few days before the polls.

"But at this moment, BN has the upper hand. In the last three years under (Prime Minister Datuk Seri) Najib (Tun Razak), we have not just been able to change the BN's position greatly," he conceded.

Liew said the coming election "looks like the most unpredictable for it can go either way."

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