

**In Sabah, brewing anti-BN revolt among non-Malay voters**  
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**By Clara Chooi**

KOTA KINABALU, Aug 11 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak's visit to Sabah today will be crucial for Barisan Nasional's (BN) survival in its east Malaysian fortress amid talk that the state's non-Malay communities have switched to the opposition camp.

The prime minister is expected to announce the terms of reference for the Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) into the state's illegal immigrants problem this afternoon, a critical issue that could decide the outcome of the coming polls not just in Sabah but nationwide.

Seats in east Malaysia's Sabah and Sarawak are deemed vital for BN to maintain federal power, because without the 55 parliamentary seats it won in both states during Election 2008, the coalition could have ended its half-century rule in Malaysia.

Sabah-based political analyst Dr Arnold Puyok told The Malaysian Insider in an interview here that although BN was unlikely to lose Sabah in the next general election, there is a growing resentment against it among the state's Chinese, Kadazandusun, and Murut (KDM) communities — the majority of whom are Christians.

He predicted that the BN may find itself in trouble in at least 13 of the state's 25 parliamentary seats, which are currently held by local KDM-based BN parties like Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) and the United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO).

These marginal seats include the Kota Marudu, Tuaran, Kota Belud, Sepanggar, Putatan, Penampang, Beaufort, Ranau, Keningau, Tenom, Beluran, Batu Sapi and Tawau seats.

"These are seats that are now controlled by KDM parties and if you look at them, they are seen to be very weak; that they are not fighting hard enough for state rights so the KDM are not happy. Go to the ground and ask people — it is clear that voters are disappointed with leaders like (PBS president Tan Sri Joseph) Pairin Kitingan," he said.

For the opposition, Puyok predicted safe wins in three federal seats — Pensiangan, Sandakan and Kota Kinabalu, which is currently held by DAP's Hiew King Cheu, Sabah's sole opposition MP.

Najib's Cabinet had agreed to form the RCI in February 8, but the nearly six months of silence following the decision had cost BN two of its senior lawmakers in Sabah: Tuaran MP Datuk Seri Wilfred Mojilip Bumburing, UPKO's deputy president, and Beaufort MP Datuk Seri Lajim Ukin, a federal deputy minister and Umno supreme council member.

The duo cited their lack of confidence in Najib and BN's sincerity in forming the RCI, a key demand of Sabah-based BN parties for decades.

Just days after their departures, Najib told a press conference that he would announce the RCI's terms today, a move described as an attempt at damage control.

But not to be outdone, Pakatan Rakyat (PR) de facto leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim will also be in Sabah this weekend and is expected to announce more political crossovers in a grand function at Kota Marudu, some two hours outside of Kota Kinabalu.

Kota Marudu is also the parliamentary seat of PBS deputy president Datuk Seri Dr Maximus Ongkili.

One UPKO leader told The Malaysian Insider that Najib's attempt may be "too little, too late" for Sabah voters, agreeing that the government's apparent inaction to resolve the over four-decade-old illegal immigrants issue has angered local communities here.

"It will be viewed as a political move and one that is lacking in sincerity. But what's to be done? What is important now is that this issue must be resolved.

"The RCI terms must be all-encompassing and must really address the problem because now, although the KDM voters believe we have been doing what we should be doing, the point they are making is that 'you guys are just not effective enough'," the leader said.

But despite anger over the RCI and BN's slipping support among Sabah's non-Muslim Bumiputeras and the Chinese, it is believed that the overcrowding of the state's opposition front may mar its chance of breaking the ruling coalition's chokehold over the state.

Puyok said the opposition must consolidate its strength and ensure straight fights in all seats to avoid splitting the opposition vote.

But this, he said, may not be possible with political maverick Datuk Jeffrey Kitingan, the younger brother of Pairin, and his State Reform Party (STAR) in the battle.

The veteran politician, known for having jumped at least six times from one party to another, has indicated his intention to stand in all seats in Sabah, likely throwing a spanner in the works for Pakatan Rakyat's (PR) hopes to ensure straight fights.

Another local opposition party, the Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP), has agreed to negotiate a power-sharing deal with PR.

"But Jeffrey is famous and he is well-known among the KDM communities," Puyok said, adding that the fight for the KDM vote could very likely be a battle of the Kitingan brothers.

"I think Jeffrey is trying to capitalise on Pairin's leadership weaknesses. If you look at STAR, Jeffrey is a smart guy.

"He can package his Borneo agenda very well to make it attractive to the KDM voters and that is why support for STAR is growing every day," he said.

Puyok added that even with Bumburing's entry into the opposition, the fight would still remain between the Kitingan brothers, both of whom are expected to go neck-and-neck for the Keningau parliamentary seat.

Kitingan's STAR may prove to be a wildcard.

The Malaysian Insider understands that Bumburing has been tasked with handling the KDM seats in Sabah to ensure that the community's support swings to the opposition, even though the peninsula-based PR is leading the fight.

BN's dip in popularity among Sabah's non-Muslim Bumiputeras and Chinese also does not appear to have hampered Umno, and the coalition's leading component is thought to have stayed popular among the state's Muslim communities like the Malays and the Bajaus.

The Muslims are said to make up some 60 per cent of Sabah's 3.12 million population. There are nearly one million registered voters in Sabah.

Puyok said this was likely because PR, together with the state's local opposition parties, lack credible Muslim leaders who could take on political giants like Chief Minister Datuk Seri Musa Aman.

"In PKR, there are only its state chief Ahmad Thamrin Jaini and leaders like Ansari Abdullah and both are not very popular. Thamrin is quiet and perceived to be weak so the opposition would not be able to breach the Muslim territory," he said.

In Election 2008, BN lost its customary two-thirds parliamentary majority largely due to significant losses in the peninsula, where it won just 85 seats while the opposition swept 80 seats.

BN's saving grace was in Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan where the coalition trounced the opposition and made a near-clean sweep, winning 55 parliamentary seats to the opposition's two.

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