

BN will recapture all Pakatan states, win two-thirds majority, say Umno leaders
Malaysian Insider
December 01, 2012
By Clara Chooi

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 1 — Umno is confident of wresting back all four Pakatan Rakyat-led (PR) states and even recapturing its two-thirds parliamentary majority in the coming polls, buoyed by a strong belief that the Najib government's reformist measures have successfully impressed the Malaysian electorate.

Several leaders told The Malaysian Insider that Umno is now fully prepared to march to the battle lines, having struggled through four years of heavy transformation from the party's administration to the mindsets of its over three million members.

Emerging fully charged after the second day of the party's assembly here yesterday, the leaders wasted no breath in declaring that achieving two-thirds is no longer an aspiration for Umno but a comfortable reality.

"Of course," Umno secretary-general Datuk Seri Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor said, when asked if the party was confident it would once again occupy two-thirds of Parliament's 222 seats after the polls.

"I believe that we will win back two-thirds and we will get back at least all the four Pakatan states... including Kelantan and Penang," he added. Kelantan has been in PAS's hands since 1990.

Generous estimates of Barisan Nasional's (BN) chances at the ballot boxes have included Kelantan as a possible casualty for PR but most observers believe that the federal opposition pact will withstand any onslaught in Penang.

Despite this, Tengku Adnan was not alone in his prediction.

Former Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim appeared to agree that Penang should not be regarded as impossible to recapture.

"We are confident of getting back Kedah, even Kelantan and Selangor... and Perlis, of course. Maybe we have to work harder in Penang," he said of the state led by DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng.

Umno deputy minister Dr Mohd Puad Zarkashi was equally as confident as his party colleagues of BN's chances next polls.

"Oh definitely, two-thirds majority. I'm very confident," he told The Malaysian Insider.

Tengku Adnan is confident Umno will win back all the four Pakatan states.

The leaders owed their optimism to what they said was a flagging support for PKR and renewed confidence in the much-changed BN government under the leadership of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, who will close the Umno congress later this evening.

The bespectacled son of Malaysia's second prime minister has already earned himself the title of "Father of Transformation" for his countless transformative initiatives and reform measures that include historic legislative changes.

Key among these was Najib's decision to pull the Internal Security Act (ISA) from Malaysia's statute books, a long-time demand of opposition leaders and civil society groups.

The prime minister also enacted a fresh law to regulate mass public gatherings, which was in the past deemed a crime under section 27 of the Police Act.

He even mooted amendments to allow greater media freedom and permit student participation in politics, keeping to his promise to widen civil liberties in Malaysia.

"This is a big example of walking the talk. Najib is clearly serious about making changes and although he ruled without a two-thirds majority, it did not pose as a hurdle to his intention to fulfil his promises," Puad said.

The deputy education minister added that Najib and BN also have their fingers on the pulse of today's voters and have acknowledged that it would be the fence sitters, new voters, youths and women who will determine their future at the ballot boxes.

He explained that this was why Najib has been pulling out all the stops in ensuring he remains close to these voter groups by keeping in touch with them constantly and doling out initiatives tailored specifically for them.

As examples, Puad pointed to the BN Youth job fair, the My First Home scheme for young homeowners and even the extension of Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia to the youth group.

But apart from BN's tireless campaign to shore up support, the Umno leaders pointed out that voters have also begun returning to the ruling pact because they have had time to weigh in on the promises dished out by those in PR.

They repeated old lines of the purported failure by PR member parties to strike a cohesive agreement to iron out key ideological differences which, they said, could prove detrimental if the pact comes to power without resolving these issues.

Over the past few days of the assembly, delegates have been warning of instability in the nation under a PR federal government, largely due to the protracted dispute between PAS and the DAP over the former party's struggle for an Islamic state and hudud laws.

Shahidan said it was due to BN's power-sharing formula that Malaysians have managed to enjoy decades of peace among the races, warning that this could be ruptured under PR.

"In Malaysia, if you want a strong government and you do not want a crisis, they you need this formula," he said.

He said that even though Umno is a race-based party like some of its partners in BN, it was not "racist".

"But somehow, because we still see some disparity between the races, we have to fight for our respective races... this is important in a sense because one race would know about their community better than others," he said.

The Malaysian Insider reported in October that BN expects to win more than the 140 federal seats it took in Election 2008 despite the onslaught and talk by PR that it can capture Putrajaya in the next general election.

Puad said BN has its fingers on the pulse of today's voters.

But BN politicians also conceded that as many as seven parliamentary seats in Sarawak and six in Sabah are vulnerable to PR but maintain that their hold on rural areas remains strong. There are 222 parliamentary constituencies and 505 state seats up for grabs in the coming 13th general election.

It is understood that BN is expecting to lose some of the seats held by four Sabah MPs who left the coalition while the urban Chinese sentiment in Sarawak could see those seats going to PR. In Election 2008, the DAP was the sole PR component party to win a federal seat each in Sabah and Sarawak.

However, the opposition has questioned BN's confidence as the ruling coalition expects to lose more seats in Sabah and Sarawak in the coming elections than before. "How is BN going to make up for losses in the fixed deposit states?" asked an opposition lawmaker when contacted by The Malaysian Insider.

"BN knows it can lose up to six in Sabah and seven in Sarawak but it hopes to make it up elsewhere, especially in the peninsula where sentiment is swinging back to the government," one Umno leader told The Malaysian Insider, saying programmes like BR1M have had a positive effect on voters.

The BR1M began earlier this year and some RM2 billion was spent for over four million households. The BR1M 2.0 also includes a one-off RM250 for unmarried people between 21 and 30 who earn up to RM2,000.

Analysts say the expanded coverage would include most of the 2.2 million first-time voters expected to cast their ballots in the next elections. There are now just over 13 million voters in the country of 28 million people.

BN politicians also point out that they are expected to get back support from the Indian community, who number 1.7 million, as the coalition has been fulfilling their requests and also extended more aid to them.

Many Indians had blamed former MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu for their poor financial circumstances and turned their backs on him and BN in Election 2008. Samy Vellu also lost in his Sungai Siput stronghold in that election.

The BN mandate expires in April 2013, leaving Najib just five months to call elections.

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