

BN, PAS, PKR racing to woo Perlis mufti for GE13
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KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 25 — Islamist PAS and multiracial PKR are both in a race to recruit Perlis Mufti Dr Juanda Jaya as their candidate for Election 2013 but the popular Muslim cleric is also mulling joining Barisan Nasional (BN), reflecting the importance of the conservative religious vote.

The Malaysian Insider understands the outspoken Islamic leader has met with numerous personalities in his home state of Sarawak recently, including political and religious elders, seeking advice on his options.

"He (Juanda) just returned from Sarawak... held a discussion there with the elders and close friends," the source told The Malaysian Insider when contacted yesterday.

In a Twitter posting on Saturday, Juanda (picture) posted a picture of his meeting with Tun Abdul Rahman Ya'kub, the uncle of Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud.

He also revealed that he had met with Taib and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak last Friday to hear the duo's "views and country's direction".

But the source said that the Muslim scholar was yet to make his decision and would not make any impulsive moves.

"He is still analysing his best options and continuing to observe the situation. He wants to ensure the best place for him, where he can contribute more effectively," the source added.

The source also confirmed that both PAS and PKR have been in a tight race for Juanda's membership, a clear sign that religiosity will be the trump card in Election 2013.

"PAS and PKR are really pushing him now for an agreement," the source said, before adding that Juanda only plans to reveal his decision "at the final stages".

Should Juanda enter politics, the source added, the cleric would create history as the first sitting mufti to stand for elections.

"But the country's political landscape has shifted. The party that offers the best candidates list will influence the mood of the polls," the source said.

Talk of Juanda's possible entry into politics comes following another speculation that his similarly outspoken predecessor, Datuk Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, would also join the coming polls contest.

As popular religious figures with large followings, both men are viewed as possible assets to both BN and PR, in their scramble for the Muslim vote, the dominant religious group in multiracial Malaysia.

According to Singapore's The Straits Times (ST) yesterday, Juanda confirmed his interest to enter politics, saying the changing landscape may require religious leaders like him to become policymakers.

"A decision will be made within the next two weeks," he was quoted as saying.

The paper also reported that for now, Juanda is slanting towards joining a PR party and is slated to contest a seat in either Perlis or Sarawak, where BN is hard-pressed to ensure it does not slacken its chokehold.

Earlier this month, it was reported that Asri had admitted he was mulling the possibility of entering the Election 2013 contest, after being courted by several political parties.

"There are talks... I will announce it in one or two weeks' time," Asri was quoted as saying on Sinar Harian on February 15.

Speculation that the maverick ex-mufti could stand in the upcoming elections first surfaced when news broke that both BN and PR aimed to woo popular clerics into their fold, hoping to capitalise on their Islamic credentials and boost either side's standing among Malaysia's Muslim majority.

It is believed that Asri may be fielded in Penanti, a state seat within the Permatang Pauh parliamentary constituency in Penang, a known fortress of opposition party PKR helmed by its de facto leader and Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

There are also rumours that Asri, now a lecturer at Universiti Sains Malaysia, would be made a deputy chief minister if PR retains Penang.

In the past the former Perlis mufti had been linked to Islamist PAS but he denied the speculation and said he would not be joining any political party.

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