

Student activist takes on PM, PKR in Pekan
Malaysian Insider
April 12, 2013
By Debra Chong

KUALA LUMPUR, April 12 — University student Mohamed Bukhairy Mohamed Sofian is challenging Datuk Seri Najib Razak in the prime minister's Pekan home turf in the May 5 polls in a bid to push for greater academic freedom.

The political science major at Universiti Malaya is also up against PKR supreme councillor Fariz Musa in Pahang's royal town.

The 22-year-old, who is running as an independent, is well aware he is the underdog, besides being a vote-spoiler in the three-cornered fight against the Barisan Nasional (BN) and Umno chief who has held the federal seat since 1976 and the opposition juggernaut, but he appears undaunted.

"We want universities to be free from political interference," he told The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) in an interview published today.

Mohamed Bukhairy is keeping his message simple: he wants both the government and the opposition to guarantee academic freedom, the widely read financial daily reported.

According to the WSJ, the campaign has symbolic value for Mohamed Bukhairy, who is reportedly the chairman of a federal student movement called the National Students Representative Council.

"Maybe (Mr. Najib) thinks running against a student is a simple thing, that maybe he can win easily," he was quoted saying, before adding, "All I can do is try."

Mohamed Bukhairy is also aware his candidacy may split the vote and as such has incurred unhappiness in some opposition circles, but appears determined to carry on.

"We hope (the opposition) can give way for students to participate in the election," he was quoted saying.

Student activism in Malaysia was a key force behind the country's independence movement against British colonialism in the 1930s, the daily reported.

Undergraduates in local universities have in recent years become increasingly more vocal and critical of the government, more so after the Najib administration moved to loosen the law allowing students to participate in politics, in a bid to draw support from the younger generation who are seen to make up a substantial voter demographic group.

Last year, several student groups took part in demonstrations nationwide to demand greater freedom and free university education.

Student voters make up some 15 per cent of Malaysia's 13.3 million registered voters for Election 2013, according to Ibrahim Suffian, executive director of pollster, Merdeka Center for Opinion Research, although he was reported doubting they would wield much clout in Pekan.

Independent candidates too have typically gained no more than about 1.5 per cent of votes in three-corner fights with the two dominant opposing coalitions, the WSJ cited Ibrahim saying.

“It’s also hard to campaign in rural areas, because the logistics are more expensive and it’s tough to establish patronage networks,” the political analyst was quoted saying.

The WSJ described Pekan as a “typical Malay hinterland that is dotted with palm plantations and has a population dominated by ethnic Malay Muslims”, with a strong military presence that has traditionally backed Najib.

The 59-year-old Najib has been the constituency’s MP after its elected representative and his father, Tun Razak Hussein died in 1976. He has kept the federal seat in subsequent general elections except for when he was Pahang menteri besar between 1982 and 1986.

Hakcipta © 2013 The Malaysian Insider

Source:

<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/student-activist-takes-on-pm-pkr-in-pekan/>