

## **'UMNO, PAS will use shariah issue to win over rural voters'**

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**By Richard T.W.**

**Whatever hopes that rural Malays will support Pakatan are now probably completely gone, says Sarawak human rights activist Peter John Jaban.**

KUCHING: Despite knowing the bill to amend the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965 (Act 355) may damage its relationship with other BN parties, Umno went ahead anyway as the political advantages outweigh the drawbacks.

"We got played. Najib planned it all ahead. Umno will milk Act 355 to its advantage for as long as it can," Sarawak For Sarawakians (S4S) spokesperson Peter John Jaban told FMT in response to Thursday's abrupt end to parliamentary proceedings.

House Speaker Pandikar Amin Mulia told reporters today he had exercised his power to adjourn the parliamentary session at 4pm yesterday (Thursday) instead of the normal time at 5.30pm due to "the welfare of the Parliament staff" who had stayed up the previous day when the Dewan Rakyat met for a record 20 hours.

Yesterday, PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang filed a motion to table the Act 355 bill, which sought to drastically increase the punitive powers of Islamic courts.

Shortly after Hadi completed tabling the motion, it was supported by Kota Bharu MP Takiyuddin Hassan, who is also PAS secretary-general, who then spoke for 90 minutes.

No opposition leaders were allowed to speak after that as Pandikar called for a sudden end to the Dewan Rakyat sitting that had begun March 6. Further debate was put off till the next Dewan Rakyat sitting.

"Umno knows that Act 355 may damage their relationship with the other BN component parties, especially those from Sabah and Sarawak, but they went ahead anyway," Peter said.

Peter, a human rights activist with the Sarawak Dayak Iban Association, believes it was not Umno's intention to allow a debate or the bill to come to a vote despite rushing through the government bills the night before.

"So it's important that they avoid an open debate on the issue. This is why they planned for it to be tabled, where it went on for two hours without interruption," Peter said, adding he believed the bill would be deferred to the next parliamentary sitting in July.

“What will happen until then? The milking of RUU355 (Act 355). Umno and PAS will use this issue to their advantage with the rural Malays and some urban Malays, too.

“They can now say that the DAP is anti-Islam, and show videos of how Lim Kit Siang tried to stop Hadi from tabling Act 355. They will say that PKR is just as anti-Islam. And Amanah is Pakatan Harapan’s lackey.

“Whatever hopes we had that rural Malays will support Pakatan are probably completely gone,” he said.

“At the same time, BN component parties will have nothing bad to say about Umno’s desire to allow Act 355. At least not openly.

“And so the component parties will keep singing the (patriotic) Malaysia songs and the (Sarawak Chief Minister) Abang Johari (Openg) songs that will have a resonance with the urbanites in Sarawak and Sabah.

“They will continue to vote for the BN component parties.

“Why change something that they see is working? The rural parliamentary seats will not vote Pakatan as it has not offered them anything as an alternative government. Even with BN offering them the bare minimum, their votes (for them) are already sealed.”

Peter believes by July, Prime Minister Najib Razak will call for a general election in September.

“No debate will happen in Parliament on Act 355. But he (Najib) has another 69 days to milk the issue with the Malays until the general election.

“PAS grassroots will feel cheated by Najib. But their top leaders are well-informed in advance — or perhaps just Hadi and (PAS Youth chief) Nik Mohamad Abduh Nik Abdul Aziz.

“(PAS deputy president) Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man is too honest and too pious; he shouldn’t be kept in the loop. Let him have plausible deniability so he can campaign on Act 355 to the Malays.”

Peter believes voting patterns may be sharply divided along racial lines in Peninsular Malaysia.

“Come September, rural Malays will vote BN or PAS. Don’t be surprised if Umno will not contest in PAS seats.

“Then, Umno-PAS will rule West Malaysia and BN component parties will rule Sabah and Sarawak. And we can re-live Act 355 again in Parliament after the 14th general election,” Peter said.

GE14 must be held by June next year.

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