

Will Pairin's Charisma Hold For Coming Polls?

BERNAMA

13/11/2017

By Newmond Tibin

KOTA KINABALU, Nov 14 (Bernama) -- Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) president Tan Sri Joseph Pairin Kitingan, who celebrated his 77th birthday recently, remains a force to be reckoned with in Sabah politics.

Known as a giant killer after single-handedly ousting the then ruling party Berjaya from power in 1985, the charismatic veteran leader is likely to play a 'prominent role' to reverse the sagging fortunes of the party after losing six state seats and one parliamentary seat it contested in the last general election.

As the country gears up for the elections before the middle of next year, Pairin is scheduled to deliver an inspiring and memorable speech at the party's congress this weekend as a curtain raiser to rekindle the fighting spirit of 1985, to achieve a convincing victory at the next polls.

Even before this, Pairin, had upped the ante on the party's desired goal and urged party members to remain steadfast, resolute and united ahead of the crucial elections. This indicates that the PBS founder is ready to go the extra mile to campaign for all PBS or the Barisan Nasional (BN) candidates.

In the 2013 general election, PBS won the allocated state seats of Tambunan, Melalap, Kiulu, Kundasang, Labuk, Tanjung Aru, Tandek and the parliamentary seats of Batu Sapi, Tawau, Keningau and Kota Marudu, but it lost to the opposition in the Tamparuli, Matunggong, Kadamaian, Api-Api, Inanam and Sri Tanjung state constituencies as well as Kota Kinabalu parliamentary constituency.

Despite the setback, PBS, a member of the BN coalition, has of late gained considerable support among the Kadazandusun-Murut (KDM) community, and is determined to rediscover its winning touch to wrest back the seats it had lost to the opposition in the 13th general election.

Many view this "below par" performance as a wake-up call for PBS, the oldest local party in the state, to right the wrongs of the last general election and come back stronger for the 14th general election (GE14).

Political analyst and senior lecturer of Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Dr Lee Kuok Tiung opined that Pairin's charisma is still needed to spearhead PBS in the coming elections although he had already indicated his wish to relinquish his post as party president.

"To me, it appears that no one is able to replace Tan Sri Pairin as paramount leader (Huguan Siou), at least for now. He (Pairin) is the people's champion and surely in the coming GE14, he will again play a significant role for PBS and BN.

"His record speaks for itself; Pairin is consistent with the party's agenda in standing up for the rights of the people of Sabah, especially with regard to the issue of illegal immigrants," he told Bernama.

Lee said all the hardships that PBS had gone through or endured in the past had only made PBS even stronger.

"PBS has its hardcore supporters, and it has always managed to recover and respond to all the challenges. For example, the riot in Sabah after PBS toppled Berjaya in 1985 yielded better results in the 1986 elections, and the fall of the PBS state government in 1994 due to party-hopping only to see PBS emerge stronger in KDM-majority seats in the 1999 elections," he said.

Lee also views Pairin as a shrewd politician by bringing PBS back into BN in 2002 after the party left the ruling coalition in acrimonious circumstances in 1990, as well as far-sighted with the interest of the people at heart by rejuvenating the party before he formally steps down as president or retires from politics.

Earlier this year, Pairin handed over the reins of the party to his deputy of 23 years, Datuk Seri Dr Maximus Ongkili, and made Ongkili the acting president with immediate effect.

Lee said passing the baton to Ongkili was timely and appropriate to ensure a smooth transition of power as well as to rejuvenate the party.

"Ongkili is a loyalist and committed to the struggle of the party, especially when the majority of the then PBS assemblymen left the party after the 1994 state election.

"I believe that with his vast experience as a minister at the federal level, Ongkili, being a pillar and tested leader, will bring PBS to greater heights...he is a new gem in PBS to carry on the party's struggle," he said.

In the last elections, Pairin fielded several new faces, including former Sabah Journalists Association president Datuk Joniston Bangkuai, who won the Kiulu state seat.

The upcoming general election is seen as a litmus test for Ongkili's popularity and leadership, should Pairin decide not to defend the Tambunan state seat and Keningau parliamentary seat.

"But, in politics, anything can happen...politics is a game of possibilities, and I won't be surprised if Pairin will contest again," Lee said.

Meanwhile, PBS information chief, Datuk Jahid Jahim said being a multiracial party and gen Y-friendly, and Pairin, whom Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak had described as the 'true Malaysian patriot' when officiating at the PBS congress two years ago, also had the

ability not only to lift up the morale of the Kadazandusun-Murut voters, but also all the other races to support BN in the coming elections.

"PBS' record of consistently fighting for and voicing out Sabah's rights, within or outside of BN since its inception 32 years ago, is a fact that Sabahans of all races can trust and rely upon.

"PBS, being a tested and experienced party; Pairin in whatever capacity, still has the greatest potential of making sure BN improves its performance including regaining lost grounds convincingly," he said, adding that the electorate should not "gamble" away their votes by choosing the opposition.

Jahid said Pairin could have achieved more for the people of Sabah had the prime minister at his time was the present prime minister (Najib) "whom we have seen as more understanding and appreciative of our rights as per Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63)".

"This has been proven in terms of security -- the formation of ESSCom/ESSZone, certain progress made to the RCI recommendations, increase in Sabah's participation at the Cabinet level, civil service participation, and other infrastructure and economic development compared to Tun Mahathir's era of marginalising (Sabah) and confrontational approach," he said.

Many PBS diehard supporters describe the upcoming elections as a perfect occasion for the people of Sabah, particularly the "tulun tokou" (KDM community) to give Pairin a fitting 'parting gift' in the form of a resounding victory for BN, saying that doing so would aptly encapsulate Pairin's four decades of dramatic, up- and-down political life.

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