

MESSY POLLS AHEAD

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THE coming state polls could be one of the messiest Sarawak will have ever seen with infighting in both Barisan Nasional and the Opposition. However, Barisan will likely gain an increase in popular votes, riding on Chief Minister Tan Sri Adenan Satem's popularity.

Political scientists like Assoc Prof Dr Faisal S. Hazis says the Opposition has largely failed to offer a "counter narrative" to Adenan's populist agenda and has not introduced enough new ideas since the 2013 General Election. National issues like a poor economy would be overridden by the surging Sarawak for Sarawakians sentiment that Adenan has played up, says the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia academic, who heads the Centre for Asia Studies.

"Generally, Adenan's 50-something populist changes has netted the Barisan gains across the board. It could also be attributed to the change of leadership. Remember, in 2004, there was the Pak Lah factor," says Dr Faisal.

Barisan's strongest voting bloc will remain the Malay-Melanau community, but results from a recent survey, which has not yet been released, indicate there has been a substantial swing in urban sentiments, he tells.

"We thought national issues could have an impact that will favour the Opposition. However, in Sarawak, and especially during a state election, national issues do not take centre stage. The survey results show that support for autonomy is really high among urban voters."

While the Opposition's support in Kuching remains rock solid, the same cannot be said of Sibu and Miri, which can be now considered marginal seats for the Opposition, specifically the DAP.

In the rural areas, Dr Faisal cites Telang Usan as one of the few seats Barisan could face losing (due to lingering dam building uncertainties).

Still, he adds, there is a considerable number of marginal seats. “It’s at these areas where infighting, three-cornered fights, could see seats swing one way or another.”

The Barisan is still facing breakaway faction issues. After Adenan took over, simmering discontent between rivalling factions of SUPP and SPDP boiled over, resulting in the creation of the Barisan-friendly UPP and Teras respectively. Crucially, the new parties boast more elected representatives than the original parties – making Barisan’s unanimous consensus approach to address component party woes harder to implement.

Adenan was circumspect on when a solution could be expected, just as the warring parties continue to trade barbs via local media. Like Dr Faisal, other political scientists also believe Barisan should worry that it might not be able to find its own win-win solution in time.

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak’s Politics and International Relations Department Assoc Prof Dr Andrew Aeria says the “one upmanship” by Barisan members could tip the balance in areas like Sibu, where incumbents have overstayed.

“If Barisan cannot address disputes, and if the incumbent stays on or if he or she puts up their children as the new candidates, then it could be possible Barisan might lose a few,” says Dr Aeria.

“But infighting on both sides would cancel each other out, with the balance favouring Barisan. Discipline in Barisan has improved since the 1970s and 1980s,” he adds.

The Barisan’s greatest hurdle will be cost of living issues, which both Dr Faisal and Dr Aeria find surprisingly negative in rural Sarawak.

“Urban voters like middle-class ideas such as autonomy, but you can’t eat autonomy. Urban and rural voters live on different planets: 6% is a lot for poor people,” says Dr Aeria.

“I was stunned one night when I went to pump petrol before prices went up. I thought, well, good, I save RM10 or so. The next guy behind me was a motorcyclist. He said, ‘If I pump now, I can save RM1 and that can help buy my baby’s milk’. The poor count their pennies.”

Bread and butter issues will be tricky for both Government and Opposition to handle. Dr Faisal says the Government has tried exempting items from the unpopular Goods and Services Tax, but inflation is still up.

Dr Aeria says, while the Opposition can campaign on hardships, the Government has resources like BR1M.

Nonetheless, say both political scientists, due to the Adenan factor, the Opposition are at risk of having their support in Sarawak rolled back, after a decade of growth since the 2006 state election, when the Opposition won six seats, up from just one in 2001.

By 2011's state polls, the Opposition had taken a total of 15 seats, with a significant 41.23% of the popular vote. The 11th Sarawak Election is most likely in late April. Following the Election Commission's redelineation, there are 11 new seats, with a total of 82 up for grabs