

Syed Nadzri: Five reasons Anwar could lose

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by Syed Nadzri

EVEN his harshest critics are making no bones about the fact that he is the odds-on favourite in this by-election. But frankly, will Permatang Pauh be all that safe for Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim?

True, the parliamentary constituency has been a home ground of sorts for him ever since, as a party rookie, he helped Umno wrest it from Pas control in the 1982 general election by defeating Zabidi Ali, a revered local ustaz.

And though he was not born and never went to school in Permatang Pauh (he is from Cherok Tok Kun which is somewhere between Kulim and Bukit Mertajam) Anwar's assumed formidability -- whether in spirit or even on the opposite side of the political fence -- hardly ebbed as his wife Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail took over the seat under Parti Keadilan Rakyat in the 1999, 2004 and 2008 elections.

But circumstances have changed somewhat -- more significantly so after March 8.

The Election Commission meets tomorrow to decide on the date of the by-election. And there can be many reasons Permatang Pauh may not live up to be Fortress Anwar after all. Here are just five of them:

1. Barisan Nasional hardly ever loses in a by-election. The near-impeccable record is due largely to its clinical machinery derived from the years of experience of contesting all the by-elections there had ever been as a coalition force.

The record of the last four years speaks for itself: 6-0 in BN's favour -- in Kuala Berang, Terengganu (August 2004), Ba'kelalan, Sarawak (September 2004), Pengkalan Pasir, Kelantan (December 2005), Batu Talam, Pahang (January 2007), Machap, Malacca (April 2007) and Ijok, Selangor (April 2007).

Quite significantly, Ijok featured PKR strongman Tan Sri Abdul Khalid Ibrahim as candidate, with Anwar himself as chief campaigner.

On this score, the odds are against Pakatan Rakyat which is likely to find it more difficult to strike good teamwork.

The PKR-DAP-Pas coalition announced on Sunday what BN had already been doing all these years, that they had reached a pact to jointly take on BN in the by-election arising from Dr Wan Azizah giving up the seat.

Penang PKR elections director Mustaffa Kamal Yusof has been appointed to oversee the coordination efforts and for a start, the coalition has agreed to set up operation centres in all 28 polling districts in Permatang Pauh.

2. Anwar will go into this fight with a sodomy allegation hanging over him and this could be crucial to the outcome either way.

Most probably, he would rebut the allegation with guns blazing by saying it is all a conspiracy to do him in or that there is vote-rigging and then draw out all the sympathy with his supreme oratory skills that could turn around even the hardest of his detractors. But at the same time, it is exactly this issue that could prove to be his nemesis, especially with BN, it is learnt, already coming out with a series of counters.

3. Anwar's opponent. It is understood that the BN, in anticipation of Anwar's attack strategy, is strongly considering fielding either a respected religious figure or someone who knows Anwar inside out. Winning over the voters in Permatang Pasir and Penanti will be crucial for both sides.

4. The timing of this by-election seems to favour BN because the coalition, after a dismal outing in the March 8 general election where it lost five states, including Penang, is looking hard for redemption. Added to that is the upcoming Umno elections. Just about everyone in the party would want to use Permatang Pauh as a stage to impress and perhaps score points for the party polls in December. There is the right mood in BN.

5. Voter sentiment, perhaps the most significant. It cannot be denied that the ground has shifted much since March 8 with a change in state government and, with that, political leaning.

It cannot be denied too that some of the policy changes instituted by the DAP-led Penang administration have not gone down well with at least some of the 58,449 registered voters in Permatang Pauh, 69.4 per cent of whom are Malays, 24.5 per cent Chinese and 5.7 per cent Indians.

BN is expected to capitalise on this to the core, put Anwar on the defensive and try to prove that he is not that invincible in Permatang Pauh as thought.