

With poll delayed from Batu Sapi emergency, pundits see advantage for Perikatan and GRS

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Analysts feel that while the decision to declare a state of emergency in Batu Sapi — which effectively postpones the upcoming by-election — has been well received by the public, it was also a strategic move beneficial to the federal-aligned GRS state government. — Picture by Shafwan Zaidon

KOTA KINABALU, Nov 20 — Analysts say that the state of emergency in Batu Sapi — declared to effectively postpone the upcoming by-election — is not only a commendable move that has the people's interests at heart, but also likely puts the federal Perikatan Nasional (PN) government in an advantageous position at a later date.

Analysts feel that while the decision has been well received by the public, it was also a strategic move beneficial to the federal-aligned Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) state government.

“If they contest now, it is almost certain they will lose. I cannot say how much of the decision was politically motivated, but the move is akin to killing two birds with one stone,” said Singapore Institute of International Affairs senior fellow Oh Ei Sun when contacted.

Oh said there is little doubt in-person campaigning should be avoided or postponed while the pandemic still rages in Sabah, especially since Batu Sapi is within the red zone of Sandakan where several clusters are located.

“There is also a simple alternative but it was not taken. The risks of campaigning can also be avoided by means of major parties such as Bersatu not contesting,” he said, referring to Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin’s Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia.

“In return, the Pakatan Harapan parties could have refrained from contesting Gerik, which would have balanced out the parliamentary numbers between the government and the Opposition.

“But to instead declare a partial or ‘regional’ emergency inevitably invites speculation that it was done to at least stall, if not preclude a likely Warisan win.”

UiTM Sabah’s political analyst Tony Paridi Bagang also believes that as a Parti Warisan Sabah stronghold, the Batu Sapi seat would most likely have remained with the party, and the postponement gives the GRS government time to fine-tune its battle plans for the eventual by-election.

Batu Sapi is a semi-urban, mixed-race seat, which saw the late Datuk Liew Vui Keong, Warisan’s permanent chairman, winning with a 4,619 majority in the 2018 elections.

“Chance of winning for Warisan is high. No election means no representative for the moment and the Opposition lacks one seat. So although it is very possibly an intentional political move, the main justification, and one that is valid, is for the people’s health and safety during these times,” said Bagang.



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Bernama pic

He said the emergency was a relief not just to constituents, but also all Sabahans who fear a fourth Covid-19 wave.

He added that there was no way to minimise the risks of campaigning, even with all major parties pulling out of the race.

So far, most major parties, including Barisan Nasional, Parti Bersatu Sabah, Parti Cinta Sabah and all component parties in the PN alliance, except for Bersatu, have opted out of the race.

“But let's say no emergency was declared, and Bersatu opted out. There could have been independent candidates, even those sponsored by a party. Then the election would still proceed, along with campaigning,” he said, adding that it was easy to justify the need for an emergency given the current Covid-19 situation.

“But in the case of Batu Sapi, perhaps it is because they know the chances of them winning now are slim and they don't want to look bad.

“In the coming weeks, I think they will be going all out to deliver whatever dues they can to the people. They will do their best to create a good image of the GRS government — things like speeding up development and welfare aid in order to create momentum for the coming election.”

Meanwhile, Universiti Malaysia Sabah's professor Zaini Othman said that the postponement of the by-election would not only benefit the newly-minted state government, but also give “political breathing space” to all parties.

“The emergency order will give all parties political breathing space and allow them to regroup after the recent state election. This includes the Opposition,” he said.

He said that once the Covid-19 pandemic is at a more manageable level, the by-election could see more parties, which previously opted out, reconsidering the situation.



Universiti Malaysia Sabah's professor Zaini Othman said the emergency order will give all parties political breathing space and allow them to regroup after the recent state election. — Picture by Firdaus Latif

“The electoral process is all about giving every single legitimate individual or political party an opportunity to take part in a democratic practice. Without their participation, the electoral process will be meaningless,” he said.

Earlier this week, the King declared a state of emergency in Batu Sapi to avoid a fourth Covid-19 wave, after the recently concluded state polls triggered the third, and to date, worst wave in the country.

The proclamation was made after Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin was granted an audience with the monarch at Istana Negara. The emergency will not involve any military rule or further lockdown.

Muhyiddin and his Cabinet had previously sought for the Agong to declare an emergency that will cover the whole country, but the move was rebuffed by the King following a discourse with the Malay rulers.

The Batu Sapi parliamentary seat fell vacant following the death of Liew on October 2 due to a lung infection.

The Election Commission then declared November 23 as Nomination Day, and set December 1 for early polling followed by December 5 for the by-election. It has since said that it will set another date for the by-election in due course.

Yesterday, Perak Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Ahmad Faizal Azumu, also from Bersatu, said a proclamation of emergency may also be needed to delay the Gerik by-election.