

Johor polls: Opposition's sidestep of flailing economy shows a loss to know how to fix it, say analysts

KUALA LUMPUR (Feb 16): Nobody has a solution to improving Malaysia's sluggish economy, which is why the Opposition hasn't made a fuss about it in the build-up to the Johor state election, said several analysts pooled by Malay Mail.

Political analyst Amir Fareed Rahim said the state election had caught many by surprise and affected their level of preparedness, but it is really the behind-the-scenes issues that are disrupting campaigns.

He said the addition of debutants the Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (Muda) had also upended existing pacts.

"The Opposition parties are consumed by their own internal issues, especially housekeeping matters and tactical discussions, that there seems to be a lack of a coherent narrative on what they can offer Johoreans.

"Having said that, there are undercurrents on the ground due to inflationary pressures of goods and the uneven pace of recoveries of business sectors; hence, any party that is able to address this issue may be able to win over more votes, especially among fence-sitters.

"It must also be remembered that Johor is a bigger state than Melaka, and therefore, local issues are hyper-local and political parties must listen very closely to localised ground sentiments," said Amir when contacted.

Senior fellow at Nusantara Academy for Strategic Research Azmi Hassan admitted he was puzzled by the lack of noise from Opposition parties regarding the weak economy.

He said he felt the prevailing attitude appeared to suggest they had given up on it.

"It is as if Pakatan Harapan (PH) has taken it as there is no hope of tackling the economy. They are saying the government is doing its best, but I think the government needs some criticism or an alternative strategy," he said.

Azmi said Opposition parties should be more like the Republican party in the United States that lambasted President Joe Biden for his weak and inadequate policies and did a good job of portraying him as aloof.

He added that if PH lost in Johor, it would be down to its own mistakes of trying to fix its internal struggles and forming alliances while disputing which flag to contest under.

Several weeks ago, PKR president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said PKR will use its own logo in the Johor state election, while DAP and Amanah will contest on PH ticket.

In a joint statement on Feb 9, DAP and Amanah said they had reached a consensus with Muda, whereby the latter would contest Tenang, Bukit Kepong, Parit Raja, Machap, Puteri Wangsa and Bukit Permai in the Johor polls.

This caused a bit of stir when Johor PKR women's wing chief Napsiah Khamis, in a post on her Facebook page, said she had been open to handing over the Puteri Wangsa seat to Amanah, but that Amanah's decision to give the seat to Muda was a betrayal of the trust given by the grassroots.

"If PH loses, it is not by default, but their own fault because PH has been shooting itself in the foot," said Azmi, alluding to the coalition's inability to find any cohesion due to the above mentioned reasons.

"The most important thing, however, is that they can't name a menteri besar with clout and influence in their list of candidates so PH might likely lose to Umno-Barisan Nasional."

Senior fellow at the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, Oh Ei Sun, agreed with both Azmi and Amir in that it will be an uphill battle for PH to win in Johor.

Oh, like Azmi, felt the Opposition is devoid of ideas and losing in Johor is almost inevitable.

"Because nobody has an idea how to revive the economy. Not BN, not PN (Perikatan Nasional) and not PH. The pandemic is undulating, and as long as it is like that, it is almost impossible to revive the economy. So what can they attack?"

"Whereas BN or Umno specifically have this built-in advantage and can always appeal to racialism and religious supremacy," he added.

The Johor state election was triggered after caretaker Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Hasni Mohammad from Umno sought the dissolution of the state assembly despite still holding a one-seat majority, following the death of former menteri besar Datuk Osman Sapian who was the Bersatu assemblyman for Kempas.

The Election Commission has fixed March 12 as polling day for the Johor state election, while nomination was set for Feb 26 and early voting on March 8.

Malaysia's economic growth forecast for 2022 is in the range of 5.5 per cent to 6.5 per cent according to Finance Minister Datuk Seri Tengku Zafrul Abdul Aziz.

He said the figure was also in line with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank projections of 5.7 per cent and 5.8 per cent respectively.

The **Department of Statistics Malaysia** and Bank Negara have announced GDP growth of 3.1 per cent in 2021, in line with the government's projection of between 3 per cent and 4 per cent.

This figure is an improvement over 2020, when GDP contracted by 5.6 per cent. — Malay Mail

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