

HARPING ON THE SAME TWO ISSUES

By SUHAINI AZNAM

COMMON SENSE and the casually observant eye says that the padi-growing district of Pendang is better off than the largely rubber smallholding Sik within the Ulu Muda parliamentary constituency, the new polling battleground tomorrow between a supremely-confident Barisan Nasional and a recently-divided PAS.

The houses grow sparse and poorer along the narrow tarred roads linking both areas. Kampung of 400 households shrink to clusters of 120. Linoleum disappears off the floor and curtains become a luxury. People cycle or ride motorcycles down Pendang roads. In Sik, they walk.

Common sense, despite stark income figures which seem to show the opposite.

In Kampung Baru, 11km from Pendang, a farmer with two acres of padi fields would earn \$1,710 a year, or \$143 a month — if he can get enough water to double crop.

In "PAS town" Kampung Ternas, 11km from Sik, only half the 120 households actually do own land. Average earnings from tapping your own trees is \$6 a day, or \$180 a month. Tap someone else's trees and you get half of that because you have to split 50-50 with the owner.

But like many things in Ulu Muda, the outsider quickly finds that things are not always what they seem. The padi farmers do not have to pay \$25 a month to buy rice which the smallholder must. And there are fish in the sawah.

POOR

In Pendang, a family works to feed itself as well as earn money. In Sik, the smallholder works to . . . well, just tap and sell latex.

And because Pendang's eastern third is covered with rubber trees, some farmers tap rubber to supplement their income. Indeed, this is what Pendang's single cropping farmers have to do, along with hiring themselves out as farm hands to their neighbours, for they can get only about \$50 a month from their own fields.

So there are the desperately poor in Pendang as much as there are the comparatively rich in Sik, where some people own 10 acres of rubber land and hire others to work for them.

It is to the 34,563 voters from among these that the Barisan's Othman Abdul and PAS' Ustaz Nakhaie Ahmad have turned the most persuasive powers of themselves and their respective election machineries.

(Independent Ahmad Bakar and his tractor symbol have kept such a low profile as to be almost unheard of, never mind seen, in most areas).

Despite what at first sight looks like two districts with two separate modes of making a living and there-

ULU MUDA ELECTORATE (34,563)

Breakdown: Malays — 31,163
Chinese — 1,800 (approx)
Indians — 600 (approx)
Thai — 1,000 (approx)

Party presence

	Branches	Memberships
Barisan Nasional		
Ummno	136 (Pendang 71, Sik 64)	12,405
MCA	3	720
MIC	1	200
Gerakan	2	300
Berjasa	7	2,000
Opposition PAS	90 (Pendang 40, Sik 50)	10,000 (approx)

Voting History

1959 to 1969 elections the areas was covered by the Kedah Tengah and Kota Star Selantan parliamentary constituencies.

1974: Ulu Muda (electorate: 25,254)
Haji Yusof bin Haji Abdullah (BN) — uncontested
(Haji Yusof is also know as Haji Yusof Rawa of PAS which was then in the Barisan coalition)

1978: Ulu Muda (27,605)
Hashim Endut (BN) — 11,195
Harun Jusoh (PAS) — 10,097
Mohd Zabidi bin Lebai Ahmad (Ind) — 266
MAJORITY — 1,098
Voter turnout — 80.11 per cent

1982: Ulu Muda (34,203)
Haji Hashim Endut (BN) — 15,271
Ustaz Fadzil Nor (PAS) — 11,711
MAJORITY — 3,560
Voter turnout — 81.29 per cent

fore dissimilar problems, the candidates have found that the difference between Sik and Pendang seems to be one of degree rather than substance.

Apart from the obvious lack of material comfort — and electricity — the people of Sik do not seem to be suffering from poverty. The children look as healthy as those in Pendang and their clothes are only a few shades more worn.

The Sik rubber smallholder does not sound envious of his padi farmer neighbour. Indeed, ironically, his major link roads are in far better condition than Pendang's rutted, bone-shaking experiences. It is expensive making a trip to a town like Alor Star where one could absorb modern, urban influences and perhaps develop a hankering for quite a different lifestyle based more on consumer goods.

Certainly, neither the Barisan nor PAS claims to have different messages to deliver in the two areas. Islam and development programmes are still the two main campaign thrusts, with the two parties arguing back and forth depending on the issues being raised.

For instance: "The Islamic Bank and University are just token concessions which the Barisan is making a big to-do over," goes the PAS line to nods of agreement at a ceramah. "Besides, what's more important than the setting up of an Islamic State with Islamic laws? Only when you push for these can you call yourself an Islamic party."

Encik Anwar Ibrahim, Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department and the Barisan's main weapon against PAS, counters the next day at a ceramah: "Do you think I'm satisfied with just one bank and one university?"

The Islamic Bank is a whole system of finance, not just putting up a building."

Then, to the delight and applause of the Felda Sungai Tiang kampung folk, he adds: "You have to start small, but it's making a start that's important. It's like having children. You don't have 10 straight away. You have one at a time."

No, there are no great issues, although the question of religion comes closest to being contentious.

The 1,000 or so voters who are Malaysian citizens of Thai descent are a case in point. Buddhist for the most part, they seem to rouse the resentment of their Malay neighbours whenever some of the latter see a new Buddhist wat (temple) being built.

RELIGION

"How can we not get angry when the Government is willing to build wats but doesn't introduce Islamic laws," said one PAS supporter, pointing to the wat beside the road as his taxi made the trip between Kampung Baru, Pendang, and Jeniang in Sik. "Buddhism is not the country's religion. Islam is."

Even the presence of the Chinese, mainly in the hub of larger kampung clusters, the one-street town and the Indians who are found mainly in the rubber estates or towns passes with little or no comment.

For the most part, the average Ulu Muda Malay does not come into contact with them and can lead his placed life reinforcing his social values in familiar Malay-Muslim surroundings.

The kampung folk accept their lifestyle. Some kam-

pungs were promised electricity in 1979 — yet to date only the poles have been put up; Kampung Belantek, 35km from Sik, was given a verbal promise of a mini-hydro electric project in 1979 — until today, the people still use kerosene lamps.

The people smile knowingly as if broken promises have become as much a part of their lifestyle as waiting for the irregular bus or hailing the occasional taxi which ignores them if it's full.

Things could be changing.

The children of Ulu Muda are becoming better educated. The Government has obviously placed education at a premium; new schools are being built and old ones extended at a breathless pace. At the moment, most children go on to lower secondary where substantial numbers drop out after Form Three, having failed their SRP.

But Ulu Muda is increasingly losing its "ulu" look. The youths often seek construction jobs in Singapore where they work for two months before returning with \$400 for their families. They rest at home a while before they are off again.

It is perhaps their earnings which make the difference between hunger and a comfortable existence for some of the poorer families, but they bring home more than money with them. They also bring back some of the urban, outside lifestyles and expectations.

For the moment, this makes little difference. For excitement, your average person still waits for the occasional wayang kulit show put up by the Information Department, plans for a daughter's wedding after harvest — or joins in the carnival that by-elections bring.