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Big brother MIC and lesser IPF woo Indian voters for BN

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THEY are rival political parties, their presidents used to detest the sight of each other and both claim equal support among Indian Malaysians.

They are the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and the Indian Progressive Party (IPF).

The former is part of the Barisan Nasional (BN), the latter is outside, trying to get in, and last weekend was yet another instance when their rivalry was on full view.

The two parties held their annual delegates meetings on the same weekend and even as their leaders fired veiled jibes at each other, they were pledging their support to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the BN in the coming general election.

As is the done thing for BN component parties, the Prime Minister opened the MIC event to a fanfare of Indian traditional music and dance.

It was an impressive crowd - 1,300 delegates and 5,000 observers - at an equally impressive venue - the Merdeka Hall of the Putra World Trade Centre and MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu was unequivocal in his party's support for the BN.

"MIC will sink or swim with you," he told the Prime Minister with his usual flourish.

Not to be outdone, IPF president Senator M.G. Pandithan declared at his party's annual meeting: "All our members are 100 per cent behind the PM and BN."

The IPF meeting took place at the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall with delegates smartly turned out in their trademark red and black outfits, and wearing name tags bearing pictures of a smiling Dr Mahathir.

Their guest-of-honour was Umno's Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah whom they garlanded with jasmine and sandalwood. Pandithan also presented the Kelantan Umno chief with a sash that gushed: Penyelamat Negri Kelantan (Saviour of Kelantan).

(Incidentally, he then proceeded to describe himself as Penyelamat Masyarakat India and lauded Dr Mahathir as Penyelamat Malaysia).

The pledges of support from these two parties cannot be underestimated in this election.

The Indian vote is rarely courted in the same way as the Chinese or even the Kadazandusun vote. Indians comprise only 700,000 of the total 10 million or so registered voters and have rarely been seen as a king-maker in an election.

But this time around, their vote will be very important in at least 50 Parliamentary seats given the unsettled nature of the Malay electorate.

These seats - Indian votes in these seats comprise between 15 and 20 per cent of the votes - are largely on the west coast mainly in Selangor, Perak, Johor and to a lesser extent Kedah and Penang.

"Ninety per cent of Indians will support the government in one way or another," declares former MIC secretary-general Tan Sri G. Vadiveloo.

This is no mere boast. Despite the presence of Indians in parties like the Democratic Action Party, the Indian vote has traditionally been considered an establishment vote. This is particularly so in the case of older generation Indians.

"They find security in the BN," says an Indian journalist.

For the the majority of older Indians, an established party - faults and all - is still deemed more reliable than the untested entity.

Many MIC leaders would be loath to admit it, but a large number of Indians continue to belong to what one might describe as the disadvantaged group and are still in need of even the most basic of assistance.

"It's sad but people in this situation have less choices in politics," says the same journalist.

Academic Prof P. Ramasamy puts it more bluntly: "Indians will probably go for the BN simply because there is no better alternative especially with DAP going with Pas."

As for Parti Keadilan Nasional, he says: "What can Keadilan do for Indians? Rightly or wrongly, they see it as a party set up for (Datuk Seri) Anwar Ibrahim to vent his frustrations against the government. BN is the lesser evil for them."

The same is not necessarily the case for many younger, Indian professionals who tend to be more aware and critical. Indian lawyers, for instance, have been quite vocal on the Anwar Ibrahim issue.

The fact that the MIC leadership seems unperturbed by this is largely because the party's strength has always been and continues to lie with ordinary, working class Indians.

They form more than 70 per cent of the Indian community and it is this group whom both the MIC and IPF claim to have the support of.

Actually, both MIC and IPF claim to have about 500,000 members each which, assuming that both claims are true, would mean that half of the two million Indians in the country are members of either MIC and IPF!

Very few believe IPF's membership claim especially after checks with the Registrar of Societies several years ago revealed that the party had only 5,000 - and not 500,000 members - to its name.

As Samy Vellu told reporters at his party's AGM: "I can bring a list (of MIC membership) and throw it here for you to see for yourself."

Despite this, Pandithan continues to brandish the hugely inflated figure without any embarrassment whatsoever, and is fond of reminding all and sundry of how he had engineered an Indian show of support at Stadium Merdeka prior to the 1995 general election.

He says now: "Numbers are important and I have the numbers. If PM says show me the numbers, I'm prepared to fill Bukit Jalil (stadium) ... no need to pay people to come. If I tell them, they will come."

Pandithan may not have the real stuff when it comes to membership but his political style (critics slam it as caste politics and demagoguery) strikes an emotional chord that defies definition among the Tamil underclass.

BN leaders know this all too well which is why IPF functions are usually graced by some of the biggest names in Umno.

The last IPF Deepavali open house saw Tun Daim Zainuddin officiating whereas the party's recent Youth and Wanita meetings were opened by Umno Youth chairman Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein and Wanita Umno chief Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman respectively.

And while Umno is courting the IPF vote bank, IPF is banking on Umno's support for entry into the BN.

"We have no problems with Umno. They are sympathetic to us," says Pandithan.

But supportive as Umno may be towards IPF, its application to the BN has been blackballed by MIC under what is known as the BN consensus system - every coalition member has to agree before a party is admitted.

"If a Malay party applies to join BN, Umno would have the main say. Likewise, MIC has the main say about IPF," says S. Ganapathy, press aide to Samy Vellu.

The attitude of the MIC boss these days is that "Pandithan will manage his party and we will manage ours".

Apparently, Samy Vellu no longer gets worked-up about Pandithan.

In fact, Samy Vellu even invited Pandithan to the wedding of his son, Velpari, where the two political foes shook hands like old friends.

"We have no grouses as long as he is supporting BN," says Vadiveloo.

MIC's determination to remain the sole Indian-based party in the BN is unlikely to shift in the foreseeable future no matter how much lobbying of Umno politicians by Pandithan.

Pandithan probably realises that he has gone as far as he can with BN and Umno. He is, afterall, one of the very few non-BN appointees to the Dewan Negara.

It probably explains, too, his conciliatory stance towards Samy Vellu.

He now alludes to the MIC president as "my friend" and explains their differences as "we cannot agree about everything in a democracy".

And whereas, he had, at one time, been vehement about "merging" (read: rejoining) with the MIC, he now says cautiously: "We have to talk about the terms and conditions".

It can't have escaped Pandithan's notice that a large number of his supporters have left for the MIC. Even at the last MIC delegates' conference, Samy Vellu approved the formation of two new branches after a group of IPF members from Bukit Pelanduk approached him about joining the party.

IPF may be solid on underclass Tamil sentiments but there is no way it can tackle with what is seen as a burgeoning problem in the community: the displacement of former estate workers who have drifted into the towns and cities in search of jobs and a new life.

They now form the new urban poor with an urgent thirst for decent housing and educational facilities. This is now one of MIC's biggest political headaches for they fear that those who cannot fit into the social order will float into crime. Much remains to be accomplished for the Indian community whose progress has been the least impressive among the three main ethnic groups in the country.

"They are the weakest race," says Ramasamy.

Unlike the Malays, they have not benefited extensively from the restructuring policies of the 1970s and 1980s. This has been compounded by the limitations of their vernacular school system and their location in what is considered a sunset industry.

Yet, these very working class members of the Indian community are the ones most likely to give their vote to the ruling party in the hope of a better life if not for themselves, then for their children.

They do deserve a better deal.

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