

25/11/2000

Chinese votes crucial for victory

Zubaidah Abu Bakar

KULIM, Fri. - Pekan Lunas is your typical Chinatown. These days, however, it has taken on an unusually decorative look. This mini Chinatown has got all spruced up with flags of different sizes and colours.

Posters, banners and symbols of opposition parties are everywhere to be found.

But here, it is the opposition's election paraphernalia which are overshadowing those of the Barisan Nasional whose presence is most obvious at the MCA Hall located right in the heart of town.

Chinese votes, it cannot be denied, are crucial on Nov 29 when Lunas' 27,647 voters go to the polls to pick their wakil rakyat.

The Chinese account for 9,121 or 34.4 per cent of the voters and they will be the determining factor whether BN candidate S. Anthonysamy is able to secure enough votes to win in the three-cornered fight with Parti Keadilan's Nasional Saifuddin Nasution Ismail and independent N. Letchumanan.

Chinese political leaders are well aware of the wisdom of explaining issues affecting the community although some are dismissing this as "trivial".

"It is the local issues and not national ones that matter," Kota Darulaman Assemblyman Chong Itt Chew said.

There are some though who chose to ignore the fact that the "unsettled" issues surrounding Vision Schools and Suqui can swing votes to the opposition, but to many others, these two issues must be settled fast.

Kedah MCA secretary Datuk Beh Heng Seong said these two issues needed to be settled first to ensure at least 70 per cent votes from the Chinese.

Although he was optimistic the Chinese would rally behind BN, Beh said many were resisting the "turning-over process".

But he said this could be done as the MCA machinery had been able to make some inroads into some of the opposition-controlled areas.

On the ground, many in Pekan Lunas are comfortable rallying behind the opposition.

When Saifuddin and Keadilan deputy president Tian Chua knocked on their doors, they gladly gave their assurance of support.

"It's raining heavily, you don't have to come here, we're aware of the issues beforehand but rest assured our votes are yours," they had told the Keadilan leaders.

It is not that the MCA leaders are not doing anything but their "messages" are still not being heard.

This is easily translated when only about 200 members of the Chinese community were present at a function where Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad explained the vision school concept to clear doubts about the plan.

Even the road leading to the school where the Minister was going was spruced up on both sides by Keadilan flags.

This naturally worried some MCA leaders. And more so is the open secret that the Chinese education movement, Dong Jiao Zhong and Suqui are rallying with the opposition.

A political observer said there was no way these people were going to budge from their stand - to send a message to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that the Chinese community has been hurt by the whole plan.

The fact that several MCA top guns like Datuk Chua Jui Meng and Datuk Chor Chee Heung were present did nothing to change their mind.

Beh said although he was optimistic that the Chinese in Kedah would rally to BN's cause, efforts must be made by leaders of the country to amicably solve the issues.

"We are being realistic here because the Chinese, especially those in the Chinese majority areas are resisting the turning-over process," he said.

However, he said, despite strong resistance, the machinery had been able to make some inroads into some "opposition-controlled" areas.

At stake here are 9,800 Chinese votes which had been said to be crucial towards ensuring victory for BN.

According to election room statistics, at the moment the BN has a slight advantage of about 400 votes.

This is based on a projection of a 70 per cent voter turn-out.

The BN expects to garner at least 32 per cent of Malay votes or 3,300, 50 per cent Chinese votes or 3,150 and 85 per cent of Indian votes or 3,200 for a total of 9,650.

Beh said should the Chinese issues be settled, he expected the victory margin to increase by another 10 per cent.

"However, this is only on paper. The MCA election machinery knows what they are up against and are working hard towards this," he added.

Chua and Datuk Ong Ka Ting, another MCA vice-president, said the Vision School issue should be put to rest as the proposed project, as explained by the Education Minister, would not in anyway affect the identity of Chinese schools.

He said Musa was invited to Lunas to allay fear on the issue and he had explained it at length.

"We appreciate the effort and the people now understand and get the true picture about the Vision School concept."

Warning the Chinese community not to be taken in by the Opposition views on Vision School, Ong said Chinese leaders would explain over and over again, if necessary, the Vision School concept to the Chinese community in Lunas.

"We know the opposition will exploit this issue ... they, including Keadilan's candidate, had been twisting the facts about Vision Schools to woo Chinese support," he said.

On Suqui, Ong said all misunderstandings had been resolved when Dr Mahathir met its representatives.

It is not only a question of putting the issues at rest but how to transform the believers into voting for the BN.

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