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Play of issues by rival parties will determine outcome of by-election

KETARI has a macho sounding name, said a Barisan Nasional campaigner who obviously is from out of town.

In fact, most out-of-State people are not familiar with this name. But, once they have heard of it, it is unlikely that they will forget.

It has a certain unforgettable ring.

By now, Ketari is a household name, as Indera Kayangan and Lunas must have been.

One of the four State constituencies in Pahang, it is setting the pace and gaining momentum as campaigning officially begins for the by-election that is pitting two local boys - Yum Ah Ha (Barisan Nasional) and Choong Siew Onn (DAP).

Soon, the majority of the residents who are farmers, will be deluged with visitors, some familiar but mostly unfamiliar.

Ceramah will be held by the political parties and, in short, this small town will assume the form of a busy election town.

There are 17,357 voters in Ketari. The Chinese make up 54 per cent, Malays (38.9 per cent) and Indians and others (7.1 per cent)

Yum and Choong are of the kwangsai clan. Why this is an important consideration is that in this part of Pahang, the majority of the Chinese are descendants of the early immigrants of this clan.

Both, according to some Chinese voters, are worthy of being their wakil rakyat as they are well-respected.

The dividing line of choice, of course, is politics.

Yum is 50 and a lawyer while Choong, 34, is a quality control executive with a local company.

Ketari has been well-served by the Gerakan through Datuk Loke Koon Kam, its State Assemblyman who died on March 3.

It should be smooth sailing for Yum who obviously has inherited a well-oiled and strong machinery.

In fact, Gerakan wasted very little time in narrowing down its choice of candidates and to name him.

On the other hand, the Opposition appeared to be plagued with problems that all point to a lack of co-operation among them.

Finally, in an attempt to show some semblance of solidarity, DAP secretary-general announced that the Alternative Front was with the DAP in Ketari.

Nomination day yesterday was something else. Notably missing were the big guns in the front to show support for Choong and the DAP.

Deputy Prime Minister and deputy Umno president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi noticed this and said it was obvious that there was no unity, solidarity or simply co-operation among them. Unlike the Barisan Nasional, of course.

Certainly, all this drama is election play. Come March 31, the voters will decide whether or not these factors count.

Ketari is a BN stronghold. But, as Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yai has repeatedly said, it is never good to be over-confident.

While DAP is playing the underdog, with its leaders openly saying that Gerakan "is sure to win", this cannot be interpreted as a sense of resignation.

Its deputy chairman, Karpal Singh, said that this was a crucial election for the party - being its first after the general election and would be a

forerunner to the coming general election.

The signs are that the DAP will go on issues like the Vision School concept including the Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina Damansara, the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's declaration on Malaysia as an Islamic State, Internal Security Act and the Employees' Provident Fund low dividend payment.

Indeed, its friends in the Opposition - Pas and Parti Keadilan Nasional - are expected to join in and play up the Tabung Haji issue.

How strong the contesting parties play the issues at hand will determine the sway of votes.

From now until the eve of March 31, the people of Ketari will have to put up with speakers representing the BN and the DAP - whether they like it or not.

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