

06/01/2002

A political paradise for rivals

Shamsul Akmar

INDERA Kayangan, a constituency in Kangar, is a misnomer. Heavenly, is what the name represents. But what is heavenly is relative.

A journalist friend covering the upcoming by-election in Indera Kayangan has cast aspersions on some of the participating politicians. He has been insinuating that some of them are spending more time in Pekan Siam, the Thai border town just 30 minutes drive from Kangar, instead of campaigning.

Pekan Siam is indeed heaven on earth for men seeking pleasures of the flesh, apart from being a shopping paradise for cheap goods, imitation or genuine.

Whether his claims are justified or he is talking more about himself, only God knows.

But for the past couple of weeks Indera Kayangan has been, and will be for the next two weeks, a political paradise for some but hell for others.

It is paradise for those who never made it to the State assemblies or Parliament to show off their oratory skills.

For Assemblymen or Members of Parliament, this is their opportunity to indulge in a monologue without having to contend with interruptions from counterparts seeking explanations or making rebuttals.

It is also an opportunity for budding politicians to prove their worth, from organisational ability and loyalty to political intrigues.

For the ordinary apolitical youths, it is an opportunity to earn some extra income from putting up posters, building polling booths and providing transport on voting day.

At the other extreme, Indera Kayangan will be inundated with information which, chances are, will contain more lies than truth, more destructive criticisms than constructive ones and more character assassinations than promotion of role models.

There will also be those taking the opportunity to "swindle" some of the political allocations, conduct ceramah with blaring loudspeakers and disturb the tranquility of the night and pollute the air by converging on the small constituency with all manner of transportation.

All in all, from the day Barisan Nasional Assemblyman Datuk Khor Liang Tee died on Dec 19 last year until the voters from the constituency choose his replacement on Jan 19, Indera Kayangan will have the opportunity to decide whether it can truly be heavenly, politically at least, or provide a hellish experience.

While journalists covering the election campaign will come across localised issues apart from hearing national-level politicians provide the bigger picture, critics, analysts and observers outside the constituency will be assessing the by-election from a different perspective.

For starters, the Indera Kayangan by-election is the first test for the MCA since the 1999 general election which it was supposed to have fared very well compared with its other partners, especially Umno.

Since 1999, there have been four by-elections, starting with Sanggang, Teluk Kemang, Lunas and Likas.

Sanggang was an Umno battle and retaining it boosted some of the party's dented ego.

Teluk Kemang was contested by the MIC and though it won, signs were there that the multi-racial co-operation in BN was not that solid.

A number of Malay voters gave their votes to the Malay candidate put up

by Parti Keadilan Nasional.

The Chinese voters there, too, showed that the support they gave the BN during the general election was not permanent, and the by-election saw their votes not as solid as in the general election.

Lunas completed what was pursued in Teluk Kemang. The MIC's candidate fell to the combined Malay-Chinese power-play.

The Malays, taken up by the accusations that the previous Assemblyman, the late Dr Joe Fernandez, was promoting Christianity among Malay youths and that the offered replacement, S. Anthonysamy, was no different, were swayed towards Keadilan's Saifuddin Nasution Ismail.

The Chinese, too, reduced their affection for the BN over the conflict between the Government and the Chinese group Suqiu, as well as the burning issue of the Vision Schools which was perceived to be an attempt to take over Chinese-type schools.

Anthonysamy was ungraciously snubbed and MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu had to eat humble pie and ignore his pledge to build a house and stay in Lunas if the party lost in the by-election.

Likas is another story altogether as Sabah politics is too fluid to relate to peninsular politics.

But much water has flowed under the bridge since Lunas.

The Sept 11 attacks on the United States by terrorists changed the world, and Malaysia was not spared.

The DAP, 11 days after the tragedy, pulled out from the Opposition Front, stating that its presence was untenable since Pas was still insisting on the setting up of an Islamic State.

Just about a month later, Opposition party Parti Bersatu Sabah decided to apply to rejoin BN.

During the same period, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad declared that Malaysia was already an Islamic nation.

All these actually put the BN in good stead to face any by-election and even the general election, a view shared by DAP strongman Lim Kit Siang who even suggested that Dr Mahathir may take advantage of the mood to call for an early national poll.

But - and there is always a "but" no matter how calm and peaceful things are - the MCA, which had enjoyed a good run in the 1999 general election that continued through 2000, became mired in internal bickering.

Since last year its domestic squabbles have cut deep from top to bottom.

Factions have appeared - Team A and Team B - reminiscent of Umno's bitter experience of 1987 which took almost 10 years to resolve.

Against this backdrop of vitriolic misgivings within, the efficacy of the MCA as the representative of Chinese interests in the big BN family is being put to the test.

If prior to this, in the other by-elections, its strength was not directly gauged, then this time around, not only will its prowess be on the scorecard but also the support it can secure from supporters of the other component parties.

It is contesting in a seat where the Chinese voters share almost a similar standing with the Malays.

If it can secure quite a solid support from the Chinese, then its partners, Umno and MIC, need only to provide about half of the Malay and Indian votes to retain the seat comfortably.

Unlike Lunas, where Keadilan fielded a Malay candidate to capitalise on the feelings of the majority Malay voters and banked on disgruntled Chinese to win the seat, it is taking on the MCA in Indera Kayangan by fielding a Chinese candidate.

Here the BN independence formula of "race-based" co-operation is being tested for its efficacy as well as its relevance in the present-day

political intrigues.

The co-operation can only be effective if the Malay and Indian voters, generally members of Umno and the MIC, are prepared to extend their support to the MCA.

Without their votes, no matter how solid the MCA may be, it can find the going tough. More so now with its domestic squabbles and internal rift.

The thinking is actually very simple.

If Umno and the MIC feel that the MCA had not been true to their candidates in the other by-elections, then they may do a number on the MCA in Indera Kayangan.

However, if the MCA had proven its worth as a partner in the coalition, then there is no reason for it to fear any setback.

With that, it has only to concentrate on the Chinese electorate.

Keadilan, assisted by Pas, realises that it cannot do a Lunas in Indera Kayangan, hence the decision to field a Chinese candidate.

Its calculation is simple - it feels that the Malay support tilts in its favour and all it needs to do is to get some 30 to 40 per cent of the Chinese votes.

And to do that it has to have a Chinese candidate as the seat is traditionally a seat for a representative from that community.

While it could take the risk of ignoring the Indians in Lunas and Teluk Kemang as the communities there represented merely some 30 per cent of the total voters, it cannot do so with the Chinese in Indera Kayangan as they form more than 40 per cent of the constituents.

The bottomline is that while racial co-operation is of essence for the contending parties to secure the seat, each community's comfort zone cannot be affected.

And as each party woos the different race groups they will seize the opportunity to contradict one another over the issues raised.

Pas can be expected to play up its Islamic credentials and Umno's lack of them when campaigning for the Malay votes.

When going to the Chinese and other non-Muslim voters, campaigners can be expected to liken Pas to the Taliban, its extremist tendencies and insistence on setting up an Islamic State a la Iran or Afghanistan.

As the days of campaigning draw to a close, bread and butter issues are likely to be the staple diet. Promises of a better life for the voters can be expected to flow freely from the opponent parties.

The more ruthless may even resort to threats and political bribery, in whatever form, apart from spreading lies and malicious rumours. In short, as polling day dawns, anything goes for the campaigners to ensure victory.

But to the ruthless and unethical campaigners, the voters should say that they accept the fact that Indera Kayangan is no paradise.

But they must not forget to tell the culprits this: "Go to hell with your lies, threats and bribes."

* shamsulmk@nstp.com.my

(END)