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Where Thai votes can be crucial

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ALOR STAR, Thurs. - Although they number only 10,000 among an estimated 820,000 voters in Kedah, the Siamese vote is crucial in some areas for the political parties battling for control of the State.

Those intending to contest the parliamentary constituencies of Pendang, Padang Terap, Sik and Baling realise that the Siamese villages in their constituencies can give them that extra edge in the elections.

Although they only provide 1,000 to 3,000 votes in each constituency, the Malaysian Siamese community is crucial in contests for seats decided in the 1999 general elections by less than 1,500-vote majorities.

Politicians wishing to woo the Siamese should bear in mind, however, that they are not easily persuaded by promises of development or spiritual benefits.

Pendang's Kampung Cina village security and welfare head (JKKK) Ee Oon @ Edin Chok Edi Proot said prospective candidates should make sure they mean what they say.

"Don't lie and don't make empty promises," he said. Ee Oon points out that the Siamese consider lying one of five cardinal sins.

"Unfulfilled promises to us are equal to murder and adultery and best not made if you value the support of our community."

Ee Oon said the community sometimes felt irked by promises made by both opposition and BN politicians merely to fish for votes.

The rural Pendang district south of Alor Star has the largest Siamese community with 3,129 Siamese voters, followed by Padang Terap (2,091), Sik (2,020) and Baling (1,081).

The Siamese are recognised by the State Government as Bumiputeras, making them eligible for membership in Umno. Ee Oon and the other 10 Siamese JKKK chiefs in the Pendang community are also Umno branch chiefs.

Siamese affairs liaison officer to the Kedah Menteri Besar Boon Som Inong said the Pendang community had been instrumental in the coalition's victory in the Pendang by-election, in which the BN's Datuk Othman Abdul beat Pas' Dr Mohd Hayathi Othman by a thin majority of 203 votes.

"Almost 90 per cent of the Siamese vote in that election went to the BN. Their more than 3,000 votes were crucial for the coalition in that by-election," Boon said.

Boon is optimistic of the community's support for the BN this time around, however. He said the State Government had taken a hands-on approach to fulfilling their needs.

"The Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain visited their villages many times and initiated programmes to uplift their welfare. Ninety per cent of Thais are civil servants. They have benefited from former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's policies.

"They are also attracted to Pak Lah (Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) because he has shown that he cares for the non-Malays and minority groups," Boon said.

One of the most persuasive reasons for the community to support the BN was the building of a bilingual Siamese school in Padang Terap by the State Government. Boon said some dissidents were returning to the BN.