

Johor: Will DAP crack the BN fortress?
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Kuek Ser Kuang Keng

Sentiments on the ground indicate that the opposition might be able to create a crevice in the hitherto inviolable Barisan Nasional (BN) fortress in Johor.

There has always been a 'zero opposition' target for the ruling coalition as far as the southern state is concerned.

In the 2004 polls, the opposition, namely PAS, only managed to secure one state seat, and that too because the BN candidate was disqualified over technical reasons. There are 56 state and 26 parliamentary seats in Johor.

However, this time around, pundits claim that DAP has a chance of capturing at least two Chinese-majority state seats from BN.

The Chinese voters in Skudai and Bentayan are said to have become more supportive of the opposition over the years.

To counter the threat, it is speculated that MCA will deploy its vice-president Dr Chua Soi Lek to contest in the Gelang Patah parliamentary seat, which incorporates the Skudai state seat, in the coming polls.

The Skudai seat is controlled by another Chinese-majority BN component, Gerakan.

'Ready for the challenge'

Chua, who is also health minister, is tipped to move from his Labis parliamentary constituency, which in turn is expected to be contested by MCA Youth deputy chief Ling Hee Leong.

Hee Leong is the son of former MCA president Dr Ling Liong Sik.

A report in the Chinese-language Oriental Daily News quoted a source as saying that Chua's move is a two-pronged strategy - to strengthen his position in Johor and restrain DAP's growing influence in Gelang Patah.

However, DAP Johor chairperson Dr Boo Cheng Hao, a two-time candidate in Skudai, said this will not discourage him.

"I will face any challenge from MCA, I will not run away," he told malaysiakini when contacted.

"It doesn't matter if he (Chua) is a minister. DAP always faces tough battles and we will do our best to fight him," he stressed.

The 43-year-old opposition leader, who holds three degrees in medicine, chemistry and law, failed to capture Skudai from Gerakan in the last two elections but managed to cut down the majority votes from 11,245 to 2,193 in 2004.

Boo said the BN has an advantage over the opposition due to its strong election machinery and financial resources.

"Although the voters in Skudai have high expectations of us, the BN can always use dirty tactics such as 'phantom voters' to affect the results," he added.

Power struggle

On the same note, Boo claimed that the main reason for Chua moving to another seat was because of a power struggle in MCA and not to check the opposition.

Chua, who is also MCA Johor liaison committee chairperson, took over the Labis parliamentary seat from Liong Sik after his retirement from politics in 2003.

The Oriental Daily report claimed that by allowing Hee Leong to contest in his father's former seat, Chua would strengthen his own position in MCA by bringing the Lings closer to him.

Chua is seen as an 'old guard' aligned to the former president. He is said to have been sidelined by the present leadership headed by Ong Ka Ting and his deputy Chan Kong Choy.

The report also claimed that even though Chua controls MCA Johor, he has been feeling uneasy over the emergence of different factions in the Gelang Patah division and wants to wipe out Chan's (photo) influence there.

The daily said that Chua declined to comment on the speculation while other MCA leaders said the party has yet to decide on the seat allocations.

Meanwhile, Boo said it is wrong to treat an election seat as a legacy from father to son, in reference to the speculation that Hee Leong may contest in Labis.

"This is unfair to voters. They do not have a chance to know their candidates. This is a form of nepotism," he added.

Hee Leong has reportedly said that he prefers to stand in his political base Perak but did not rule out the possibility of moving to Labis.

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