

By-election or buy-election?
Malaysiakini.com
April 18, 2007
Dean Johns

The much-hyped match-up in Machap between the MCA's Lai Meng Chong and the DAP's Liou Chen Kuang turned out, from all the reports that I've seen, to be pretty much of a muck-up for those of us who were hoping for a fair contest that might have given Barisan Nasional (BN) a fright.

Even with the last-minute aid of an impassioned address by Anwar Ibrahim, the resurgent Parti Kedilan Rakyat star, the DAP polled a mere 400 or so votes more than it received in its five-votes-to-one drubbing back in 2004.

But that was hardly surprising in the light of the way BN threw MCA and Umno celebrities, several sports stars and heaping helpings of goodies at the electorate's grateful voters. All the usual suspects were on hand to spread the BN message and the handouts that are customary on such occasions.

At an 'Evening with Najib', for example, Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abduk Razak himself handed out such statesmanlike advice as "A by-election like this is not the time to show that we are upset over certain small matters".

I assume he was referring to certain unmentionable "small matters" like high fuel prices, hike in toll charges, BN's dubious record in its pledged fight against high-level corruption, a murky murder case involving a Mongolian woman and one of Najib's close associates, and persistent allegations by Anwar and others concerning questionable "commissions" on submarine and aircraft purchases by the defence ministry, of which Najib is the responsible minister.

But in case the worthy electors of Marchap disagreed that a by-election is not the time to register discontent over such trifles, he announced an allocation of RM3.7 million for the upgrading of water pipes and the construction of a "multi-purpose hall" for Felda Tun Ghafar Hutan Percha, plus gifts of land in Felda Tun Ghafar Machap to 102 Malay families, and later to 50 Chinese as well.

In case anyone missed the point or purpose of such astonishing largesse, he then made the point that beneficiaries of the 99-year land lease would form a 'Barisan Nasional Kampung', and added that "one should repay favours when the time is right and the favour should be repaid by voting BN on April 12".

The MCA candidate himself had already reportedly promised five families sums of between RM5,000 and RM13,000 for house repairs and, as I gather is standard procedure in areas experiencing by-elections, local roads had been resurfaced and equipped with upgraded lighting.

Other BN luminaries were on hand with handouts too. Umno Youth head and Education Minister Hishammuddin Hussein and Umno Youth vice chief Khairy Jamaluddin, waving ladles instead of a keris on this occasion, joined MCA Youth chief Liow Tiong Lai in doling-out free food to the hungry citizens.

Predictable scenarios

This exercise in hospitality made an excellent press photo opportunity, but it also prompted Dr Xavier Jeyakumar of the Coalition for Clean and Fair Election (Bersih) to make a police report on the grounds that it was in contravention of Section 8 of the Election Offences Act of 1954, which prescribes imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years and a fine not exceeding RM5,000 for any person guilty of 'treating', or providing any food, drink or refreshment for the purpose of corruptly influencing others to give their vote during elections.

Given the cozy relationship between the police and their political patrons, I assume Jeyakumar's report will be found to be baseless, as will the DAP's subsequent police report alleging the bribery of voters with cash.

Observers including DAP party worker Thing Siew Shuen and Federal Territory DAP vice-chairperson Steven Chan reportedly witnessed "more than 70" people queuing outside a vacant dwelling beside a house occupied by Johor Umno members, then entering individually and emerging with money. One man allegedly admitted that he and his wife had been paid RM100 each, and another gleefully announced that he'd be "having KFC tonight".

MCA President Ong Ka Ting dismissed DAP suspicions of bribery with the comment: "The DAP will always lodge reports based on their political tactics. Whatever they do are for political mileage. They are trying to put on some last-minute acts to fish for votes."

Not that there would have been many spare voters for the DAP to fish for by the last minute, it seems to me, considering that the MCA and Umno had already hooked most of them with gifts of home improvement funds, upgraded civic amenities, land and hospitality, as well as the alleged hard cash.

But it seems to me that in the circumstances the government didn't get much of a run for its - or rather the public - money. Despite all the inducements BN employed to solicit support in Machap, over 25 percent of the registered voters didn't show up at all, just as in 2004, and over 20 percent of those who did take the trouble to vote proved so ungrateful as to go with the DAP.

Questioned as to whether 'money politics' played a part in the BN's Machap victory, Najib, predictably, replied "no, we don't buy votes. But the prime minister, in his television appearance immediately after the result was announced, seemed puzzled that not all the votes could be bought, musing that "we must study as to why there are voters in Machap who vote for the opposition".

Abraham Lincoln answered that question 150 years ago with his well-known statement that "You can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time."

Or to translate that into the contemporary Malaysian context, if the only way you can win a by-election is by turning it into a buy-election, the closer you and your coalition colleagues are getting to your richly-deserved bye-bye election.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.
Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/66089>