

Ijok comes ALIVE!
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Two decades after his death, there is still a god-like reverence for Maradur Gopalamenon Ramachandran among the denizens in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. He is no stranger to the Tamil-speaking diaspora as well.

The former chief minister, popularly known by his initials MGR, rose to fame as a movie actor. He ruled Tamil Nadu, with an unrivaled popularity for 10 years, until his death in 1987 at the age of 75.

Last night, the 'Puratchi Thalaivar' or Revolutionary Leader made an unexpected appearance at a Tamil school in Batang Berjuntai to campaign for a fellow politician - Barisan Nasional (BN) candidate K Parthiban.

No! He was not raised from the dead at the behest of MIC president S Samy Vellu. It was an impersonator, clad in a cowboy outfit and prancing about the stage, who had Indian voters at a dinner event enthralled.

Judging from the response of the 500 or so people at the MIC-organised bash, also attended by Samy Vellu and Parthiban, the late MGR might just be able to tip the scales in BN's favour.

Batang Berjuntai is located under the Ijok state constituency which is gearing up for a by-election on April 28. There are 3,369 Indian voters here.

Its former representative was MIC's K Sivalingam, who passed away on April 4, paving the way for a battle between Parthiban and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) candidate Khalid Ibrahim.

Carnival-like atmosphere

With the contest just days away, a carnival-like atmosphere has descended on the sleepy hollow, which lies some 50km north of Kuala Lumpur.

Visitors are now greeted by the smell of freshly tarred roads, with hundreds of posters lining both sides. And as far as the poster war goes, the ruling coalition is visibly winning.

The town is abuzz with activity: political parties setting up operation centres in every nook and corner, heavy machineries ploughing late into the night carrying out repair and upgrading works, party workers putting up posters and banners and police cars with flashing lights zipping here and there.

Even restaurant and stall operators are keeping their businesses open way past normal hours and making a killing in profits.

When malaysiakini visited the town last night, several opposition Indian supporters and leaders, including PKR's national integration bureau head N Gobalakrishnan, were seen holding a mobile ceramah from the back of a pick-up truck.

Just metres away from a BN operations room, they addressed a small group of local Indians, comprising mainly of curious onlookers.

Apart from urging them to vote for the PKR candidate, they also rained criticisms and insults on Samy Vellu that ranged from his alleged corrupt practices to his bald spot.

However, local MIC leaders remain unfazed and are confident that Parthiban would emerge victorious.

"Hundred percent, he will win. Indians in this area know him well and will definitely vote for him. He is a young and vibrant leader," said Taman Pancaran MIC branch chief S Nagarajan when met at the dinner event

Nagarajan, who has known Parthiban for several years, described him as a friendly and easy going person.

He has no doubt that the 38-year-old former school teacher is the best choice for Ijok. "He will do more for the people here than what Sivalingam has done," he stressed.

No chance at all

Asked to rate the opposition's chances of winning the seat, Nagarajan said it would be impossible for them to do so.

"No chance at all, especially among the Indian voters. They go around talking but they have no support here," he said, adding that the locals have no grouses against the ruling coalition.

Several local Umno leaders and supporters also expressed a similar view. They too are confident that the Malay electorate, who make up the majority, would back the BN candidate.

Opposition supporters, on the other hand, are not losing hope. Despite the acknowledging the uphill battle that lay ahead, they believe that Ijok could set the stage for a major upset.

The most poignant analysis, however, came from a long-time resident, who wished to be known only as Pak Mat.

"Apa macam pakcik, BN atau PKR yang menang?" (So uncle, who will win BN or PKR?) was the question posed to him in jest.

With a wry smile that seem to indicate that he has seen one too many elections to get overly excited, he replied: "Tak tahulah, biar orang sini tentukan." (I don't know, let the locals decide).