

Ijok – not just another by-election
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It is likely that the Ijok by-election will see a victory for the BN candidate and defeat of the opposition adversary like many other by-elections in Malaysia.

After all, numerous factors that determines by-elections are far more favourable to the BN than the opposition.

Nevertheless, in some ways, the Ijok by-election is shaping up to be a unique contest of sorts.

First and foremost, in terms of the personalities contesting, PKR's heavyweight Khalid Ibrahim is quite widely believed to be able to offset the natural weaknesses of his party as the opposition - especially in term of campaign financing.

Moreover, unlike other younger and less established leaders of PKR and other opposition parties, Khalid has many friends, former colleagues and even personal supporters in the ruling coalition, corporate world and other established institutions or mainstream organisations.

This 'connected-ness' of Khalid has made him less vulnerable to personal attacks or character assassination by the propaganda machinery of the ruling coalition which often sees or postures itself as the 'guardian of social order' against 'rabble-rousers' or 'trouble-makers'.

Despite his education, social experience and 'connected-ness', Khalid is also widely seen as a man who can speak calmly even when he criticises the policies or personalities of the ruling coalition, and also relate to common people in the streets in their organic language.

Khalid's better credentials

Khalid is well-known locally and also abroad as a economist and also an intelligent critic of the race-based affirmative action programme, the New Economic Policy and Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's management of the economy.

In short, Khalid is a candidate who can add values to his party.

Although his opponent in the Ijok by-election K Parthiban of the MIC touted as a decent man and a 'local boy', his personal stature and standing at the national and international level is admittedly not as high as Khalid.

However, unlike Khalid, Parthiban's candidacy and campaign is well organised with the backing of the powerful and resourceful BN machinery.

Parthiban's campaign managers and workers may also point out that their candidate is at his prime at the age of 38, whereas Khalid is 61.

But of course, they have to be discreet in doing so, or risk offending voters with traditional

values.

48% non-Malay seat

Another dimension that makes the Ijok by-election potentially different from other by-elections is the issues raised during the campaign.

Already, Khalid the economist and critic of NEP has reportedly argued in Ijok that "it is better to teach the people how to fish than giving them fish" with reference to the underlying philosophy of the controversial race-based affirmative action programme.

Certainly, Khalid's critique of the NEP would appeal to Chinese and Indian voters, although he would almost certainly incur the wrath of Umno who would brand him as a "traitor to the Malays".

The problem for Umno should they accuse Khalid of 'racial treachery' could backfire among the ethnic minorities which make up slightly more than 48 percent of Ijok voters.

Playing such a card may not be effective towards a Malay audience either because Khalid himself carries a certain amount of nationalist credential as an economist who worked to achieve some positive aspects of the NEP such as the reduction of foreign dependency of the Malaysian economy in the 1980s.

With support shown by PAS, Khalid's nationalist credentials is expected to be further enhanced and making him less vulnerable to Umno's attempts to discredit him.

There will be cost and benefits should Umno resorts to racial posturing in its attempt to criticise Khalid.

However, given that racial politics runs deep in Malaysia, it is inevitable that Khalid and PKR would be constantly attacked by Umno's ally MIC for not fielding an Indian candidate.

Again, this may work as long as the 51.8 percent of Malay voters are kept in the dark about it.

In this age where information has begun to cross ethnic boundaries, any suggestion of Khalid and PKR being "too Malay" may also backfire on Umno.

Additionally, as PKR is expected to also play up the politically controversial murder of Mongolian woman Altantuya Shariibuu, which has prompted Umno deputy president and Deputy Premier Najib Abdul Razak's pledge to rebut the allegations.

So, the Ijok by-election is going to set big agenda of political debates for the coming general elections even though Khalid Ibrahim is not expected to win.

It certainly does not sound or look like just another by-election.

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