

Ijok: More than meets the eye?
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James Wong Wing On

Before a by-election was announced, not many had heard of the sleepy hollow. Now, with the election campaign reaching feverish heights, Ijok has become a household name.

Outsiders are pouring into the constituency in the form of campaign workers, journalists, observers and not to forget, gamblers out to make a killing from this Saturday's contest.

Suddenly, Ijok residents have not only been able to see, touch and talk to top politicians from both sides of the divide but also reporters from the international media.

Like all by-elections, money circulation in the local economy has shot up causing coffee shops, food hawkers and stalls to prosper.

The level of voices, as well as noises, in the otherwise quiet place has increased too as public speakers from both camps attack each other or publicise themselves, some with issues of high politics, others on bread-and-butter matters.

The media of all languages in Malaysia, both the mainstream and alternative, have also been dishing out large doses of reports, commentaries and analyses of the campaign, albeit from vantage points of different values and interests.

Like the recently concluded Batu Talam and Machap by-elections, no one expects the opposition to win.

No certainty

However, unlike in Batu Talam where the popular speculation focused on whether the young independent candidate would retain his deposit, no one has ever thought of Parti Keadilan Rakyat's Khalid Ibrahim losing his deposit for failing to obtain one eighth of the votes cast in Ijok.

Also, unlike in Machap where the Malay voters were rightly predicted to be solidly behind the Barisan Nasional, the Ijok by-election has seen no such certainty as yet.

That explains why, even though the seat is being contested by a MIC candidate, Umno has been extraordinarily active in the campaigning, rolling out not only 'developmental projects' worth millions but also daily visits to the constituency by its ministers and top guns like Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak and Selangor Menteri Besar Dr Mohd Khir Toyo.

But Umno is not only countered by PKR in the Malay-majority area but also the battle-hardened PAS.

In the Chinese-predominated areas, while some top guns of MCA and Gerakan seem to be working hard in the media for BN's victory, their grassroots have yet crank up the heat.

In any case, the influences of MCA and Gerakan in the campaign are also being checked by DAP as well as some independent opinion leaders in the community such as influential veteran educationist Loot Ting Yu and his followers who are certainly strong enough in their cultural credentials to shield PKR and its candidate from being attacked as "anti-Chinese education".

Loot and his followers were instrumental in swinging the Chinese votes for the then newly formed PKR in the historic Lunas by-election in Kedah in 2000, which saw an unexpected defeat of BN.

The absolute strong point of BN in the Ijok by-election at this juncture seems to be the Indian voters.

Critical issues

In any event, win or lose, PKR has certainly succeeded in raising important and critical issues such as the New Economic Policy as well as breaking Najib's 'elegant silence' on the murder case of a Mongolian woman in Malaysia allegedly involving the use of military explosives and police special operations personnel.

Najib, who is also defence minister, has repeatedly denied in his campaign speeches that he had ever known the murder victim. The trial of the case is, of course, still pending.

Not to be taken lightly is also the fact that former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad decided, in the run-up to the by-election, to remind Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi that he was only meant to serve one term and had agreed to pass the position to Najib.

Is Mahathir trying to save in time what he sees as the imperceptible fading credibility of Najib or to neutralise not an impossible scenario of Abdullah or his supporters working covertly and indirectly to erode the deputy premier's popularity through the opposition campaign in Ijok.

As it is well-known, Mahathir and his supporters had publicly pressured or lobbied Abdullah to choose Najib as his deputy in the government and Umno.

It had been long speculated in circles of high politics that while Abdullah was not Mahathir's first choice as his successor, Najib was also not Abdullah's preferred second-in-command.

So, the Ijok by-election seems to have provided an occasion for these factional fault lines within Umno and the government to resurface through controversies like the murder of the Mongolian woman.

In politics, the mere breaking of an opponent's 'elegant silence' is usually seen as the first step towards tilting the balance.

Seen in this light, the Ijok by-election could be remembered as a turning-point in Malaysia's political history because some important agenda or issues have been set in a very subtle and nuance manner by the big players.

These agendas and issues would certainly not be forgotten after the by-election. Here lies the significance of Ijok.

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