

**A BN vote bank is aided by Pakatan
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The Temiar of Sungai Siput have long been a reliable vote bank for the BN, something like 9,000 of them domiciled on the banks of tributaries of the Sungai Perak that crisscross the constituency, giving the ruling coalition 99 percent of the vote in the general election of 1999, 96 percent in 2004, and 90 percent in 2008.

In all that time, the recipient of this largesse, MIC's S Samy Vellu, confined reciprocation to the giving out of presents to headmen while the Orang Asli Department (JHEOA) periodically supplemented the trickle with handouts.

Apparently, from whom a lot is given little is required.

A rather bleak situation, one might say, to a prospective MP trying to break the cycle of servitude in which the Temiar are immured.

But Dr Jeyakumar Devaraj of the Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM), since 1999 a rival claimant to S Samy Vellu for the allegiance of Sungai Siput's voters, decided that even if naught is to be had for service to the Temiar by an opposition politician, service must still be rendered.

Thus when the 400 Temiar of some 50 households in Kampong Perje in Pos Legap needed money in 2009 to buy new cables to secure a rickety bridge over the Sungai Pelus, used by them to ferry the latex they tapped from rubber trees off the banks, they approached their newly elected MP.

"We decided that because their conditions were wretched, their needs overrode other considerations such as their solid support for the BN," said Jeyakumar, who was elected in March 2008 on a wave for the opposition that year.

"Also, representatives of Kampong Perje continued to attend meetings we held to discuss Orang Asli needs even after the fall of the Pakatan state government in February 2009," he said. "Reps from other Orang Asli villages kept away out of fear," he added.

Popularly known as 'Dr Kumar', the PSM activist had made forays into Orang Asli villages deep in the interior of Sungai Siput even when he was not their elected MP prior to 2008, to see what could be done for them.

"They are a terribly marginalised group and they needed all the help they can get," he rationalized.

So when Pos Legap's Temiar wanted new cables for a dilapidated bridge, Dr Kumar and his crew of PSM stalwarts in Sungai Siput decided that it would be better to build a new bridge a kilometer away from the site of the old one.

"The old one was too rickety," he said. "There was little point in shoring it up with new cables."

But where to get the money for the new bridge, given that opposition MPs are deprived by

the federal government of constituency allocations rendered to the tune of RM2 million a year to BN legislators?

PAS leader steps in to help

Dr Kumar, who was elected on a PKR ticket because PSM was not yet a registered political party in March 2008, asked help from his Pakatan Rakyat cohort in Sungai Siput.

The PAS leader in the constituency, Ahmad Mazlan Othman, a retired army engineer who had been a candidate for the Lintang state seat in the 1999 and 2004 elections, was instrumental in getting his party to contribute RM5,000 to the overall cost of the new bridge which was estimated at RM70,000.

The rest of the budget was raised from the MP allowances for Dr Kumar (RM35,000), from sundry friends of his (RM20,000) and from two Catholic groups (RM10,000).

In short, the money for the new bridge came out of a Pakatan-like collaborative effort by assorted groups. From whom much is deprived, not a little can be got.

Construction of the bridge, which was supervised at every stage by Ahmad Mazlan, began in August 2009.

A squad of PAS volunteers helped out at every stage of the construction. PSM activists M Sukumaran, M Augustine, S Nagentiran and Alexis Paulraj did turns helping out with the technical and other inputs.

Jointly and severally, this motley crew pooled their slender resources which Ahmad, with his professional expertise, ably marshaled to bring the bridge to near completion.

"There is only a little more work left to be finished," said Dr Kumar, "which Ahmad says would be completed this weekend or over the next."

There will be no opening ceremony for this bridge that a Pakatan-like 'gotong royong' has almost brought to pass for the Temiar of Pos Legap and no plaques to honour the selfless band involved in its conception and construction.

Whether the bridge would shift the Temiar's voting allegiance is a question of some irrelevance to Dr Kumar.

"The wretched must inherit the earth," said Dr Kumar in typically socialistic, Franz Fanon-like, style.