

BN likely to miss Tenang majority target
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As campaigning for the Tenang by-election passes the halfway point for both BN and PAS supporters, one thing for certain is that lethargy is beginning to set in for everyone.

It did not help either that the non-stop rain or drizzle since yesterday disrupted campaigning work for many.

Though the party faithful are braving the wet weather in distributing leaflets or putting up flags, both candidates - BN's Mohd Azahar Ibrahim and PAS' Normala Sudirman (left) had to revert to 'indoor programs'.

Falling sick now is truly the last option for anyone.

The chilly and damp weather notwithstanding, the issues raised so far had in contrast, been fiery.

Much ado over handshake

Umno's message had been more subtle, with Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak setting the tone for the BN campaign, mainly highlighting the successes of the ruling government and the Federal Land Development Authority (Felda).

But in contrast, component party MCA came out with guns blazing, flaying PAS - and to a certain extent, the DAP - over the Islamic state agenda issue, which MCA claims is outlined in the PAS constitution.

Using the platform as a bogeyman, especially among Chinese voters, even Normala's refusal to shake the hands of male voters became a topic of conversation at its ceramah.

Possibly not realising that it was a common trait of the more conservative Muslims not to touch non-mahram of the opposite sex, the heat generated forced Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin to put a lid on the topic, leaving MCA president Dr Chua Soi Lek shaken but not stirred.

But even with nightly ceramah that Pakatan Rakyat parties usually deploy, Umno's message is already sitting comfortably with the people, especially the Felda settlers who make up more than half of the Malay electorate.

Pakatan fails to make inroads in Felda

If Johor is already an Umno stronghold, then Felda settlements in the state are Umno bulwarks.

Traditionally, these settlements in Johor are among the most well-kept in the country, running a close second to those in Pahang, Najib's home state.

And those in Tenang are no different, including the three settlements of Felda Tenang, Felda

Chemplak Barat and Felda Chemplak.

While plush bungalows spot the settlements, boasting several makes of foreign cars in the porch - presumably belonging to the more industrious settlers - most approached by Malaysiakini appear to be content with the lifestyle that Felda has afforded them.

However, the anti-establishment undercurrents of the second and third-generation settlers run deep, disillusioned with the insufficient land and housing for them.

But that is hardly a reason for them to switch votes to PAS. Even Pakatan bigwigs such as PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim and PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang had failed to make a ripple in the settlements, attracting an attendance of 250 at the most at their ceramah .

Even if the younger Felda crowd are truly jaded with the way the settlements are run , it is still unlikely that their votes will flow in significant strength to the Pakatan. While the PAS-linked Anak - an NGO on Felda welfare - has appeared to have won a small following among the settlers, it is still not enough to move voter sentiment in the opposite direction.

However, Umno is not taking Anak's growing influence lightly, even setting up the Jawatankuasa Badan Bertindak Generasi Kedua Felda (Second Generation Felda Settlers Action Committee), seeking to resolve existing issues through government channels.

Mohd Azahar's family name is also expected to carry him a long way in Tenang as his father, Ibrahim Daud was the district penghulu for years before becoming an assemblyperson for one term.

With Mohd Azahar being a former assistant district officer (ADO) in both Rengit and Segamat, many of the Malay electorate may also cast their ballots in his favour , in the hope that he may help solve much of their land problems.

Having reaped 80 percent of the Felda vote in Tenang in the 2008 general elections, all signs indicate a slight rise in the Malay vote for the BN.

MCA tactic misfires

However, things could not be anymore different with the Chinese voters in Tenang, who comprise 39 percent of the electorate.

In fact, Mohd Azahar's stature as an ADO may backfire where the Chinese are concerned, most of whom are traders or palm oil shareholders, having gone through the chore of dealing with mid-level bureaucracy

And despite MCA continually harping on PAS' Islamic state ideals, infused with scary stories of the hudud law, it appears that most of the Chinese voters are not too bothered by the notion.

If crowd size in a ceramah is any indication of popularity, then DAP leaders such as Lim Guan Eng and Lim Kit Siang are the superstars in this part of town, easily drawing an average animated audience of 300, mostly locals despite the rain.

But the polling date itself may throw a spanner in the works for the Pakatan, especially where the Chinese voters are concerned.

Most of the community's youths have gone to greener pastures in Johor Baru, Singapore or Kuala Lumpur.

With the polling date slated for this Sunday being a good four days away from the Chinese New Year, it is unlikely that young urban Chinese voters - who are generally more inclined towards the opposition - will make their way back home.

However, while Tenang's Chinese and Malays live in relative comfort in Tenang, the same can't be said for the Indians.

Most of the 1,780 members of the community there, or 12 percent of the voters, are estate workers or labourers, hired by giant plantation conglomerates.

The furniture in their rows of uniformed brick houses, quarters provided by their employers, are spartan, devoid of any sign of luxury.

Even profits from the rising cost of commodities trickle down to them at a niggardly pace, with some only earning RM23 a day, on days that they are able to tap rubber.

But despite it all, it is expected that the Indian votes will remain with the BN, out of blind loyalty and an ingrained sense of gratitude.

BN's 5,000 majority target dim

While Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin had earlier set a 5,000 vote-majority win, many are wondering if it was too lofty a target.

At a glance, it would only seem practical. After all, BN's late Sulaiman Taha won by a 5,517-vote majority in the 2004 general elections. They took a slight hit, when that was trimmed to 2,492 in the last polls.

For one, Chinese support in 2008 for the PAS candidate in the Tenang state seat was estimated at 55 percent. But in a split vote, 70 percent of them had favoured the DAP candidate in the Labis parliamentary seat.

With the DAP's aggressive campaigning which includes the party's top guns for megawatt ceramahs, a 15 percent boost from the Chinese voters to the 2008 polls support is all too possible.

As for Malay voters, about 70 to 80 percent of them had been for the BN in 2008 for the state assembly candidate, widening that margin does not seem very likely.

Despite the open Umno support in the constituency, PAS can count on their own loyalist to hold the party's ground by about 15 percent.

Given the stalemate between the Malay and Chinese votes, the race is now on for the BN go all out to solidify its Indian support to beef up its majority.

Yet, BN won approximately 60 percent of 1,780 Indian votes in 2008, so it is unlikely it can win more for it to make a difference.

As such, though a BN victory this time is almost a shoo in, a question mark still hangs over the 5,000 majority target.

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