

Kita roadshow for Najib's 'save democracy' reforms

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Najib Razak's visit to Penang for a charity event on Sunday is seen as the prime minister's hijacking of an event initially sponsored by the state government and a local Chinese newspaper.

Najib is scheduled to join a cycling event at the Straits Quay to raise funds for Chinese schools, and he offered to sponsor the entire event that is organised by the most widely read Chinese language daily in the northern region, Kwong Wah Jit Poh.

Now known as the 1Malaysia Charity Ride for Education 2011, the event is expected to raise about RM15 million for some 15 Chinese schools in Penang.

But not everybody sees Najib's gesture as a noble attempt to promote education or to aid the Chinese, to whom issues of education have always been close to their hearts.

Pantai Jerejak assemblyperson Sim Tze Tsin (left) said Penang executive council member Lydia Ong has been working very closely with the newspaper for several months to make the event a success.

But several weeks ago, Ong received "an order" from Putrajaya to hand the event over to the federal government.

"So, out of courtesy, the state government handed over the project to the PM's Department, since Najib had promised donations to the Chinese schools," Sim told Malaysiakini.

'Guan Eng gracious in handing over event'

"I believe Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng has been gracious in handing over the sponsorship of the event to the premier, since it will be beneficial to the people," added Sim, a former political aide to Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim.

Weeks ago, when asked if Najib had "hijacked" the event, Lim said the state government was prepared to work with federal authorities for the benefit of the people.

However, to repeated questions from reporters on the matter, Lim replied, at a press conference in the presence of Kwong Wah Jit Poh's company directors: "If you want to interpret it that way (as Najib hijacking the event) it's your prerogative."

Stressing that Najib's frequent visits to Penang showed how important the state was to Putrajaya, the chief minister added: "We will be happy if he visits more frequently."

"I understood that Kwong Wah Yit Poh needed to respond positively when the Prime Minister's Office recently offered to undertake the project."

However, Najib's benevolent gesture is seen as the premier's bid to make inroads into the hearts and minds of the local Chinese community, which abandoned the MCA and Gerakan in the 2008 general election.

With Kwong Wah Jit Poh having the largest Chinese newspaper readership in the northern part of the country, Najib's effort is seen as nothing more than "offering sweeteners" to garner votes for the BN in the coming general election, which is widely expected to be called much sooner than its 2013 due date.

'Penangites won't be fooled'

Sim, who is PKR Bayan Baru division chief, said Penangites were "pragmatic" and would not be fooled by these sweeteners dished out by BN leaders such as Najib and his deputy Muhyiddin Yassin.

"This does not work any more. BN leaders had promised money to many schools during the 2004 and 2008 election campaigns, but they did not deliver on their sweet nothings," he said.

"With our limited funds in Penang, we have managed to give out about RM16 million yearly to Chinese schools and RM5 million to Agama Rakyat and Tamil schools. So who is more committed to education?" he queried.

federal government hari raya open house permatang pauh 110911 najib abdul razakThe people in the state are generally aware that an election is around the corner, especially with top BN leaders frequenting Penang.

Two weeks ago, Najib attended the National Hari Raya open house, which was held in Permatang Pauh - PKR supremo Anwar Ibrahim's parliamentary constituency - where thousands attended the feast.

Last Saturday, his deputy Muhyiddin Yassin, who is also education minister, spent a whole day on a working trip to various spots in mainland Penang.

In a matter of hours, Muhyiddin dished out close to RM50 million for various development and education projects at a BN Hari Raya open house in Nibong Tebal.

Both leaders are sending out signals that the federal government will not abandon Penangites even though they voted the Pakatan Rakyat in three years ago.

"I think Najib and Muhyiddin are merely trying to outdo each other in trying to garner votes for the BN," Sim said, laughing.