

'Felda settlers fight fear to back Pakatan'

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INTERVIEW The BN may have always considered the 317 settlements under the Federal Land Development Authority (Felda) scheme to be its electoral 'fixed deposit', but the political landscape may be changing.

Votes cast by the 112,635 settlers could lead to four more states falling to Pakatan Rakyat in the next election, according to PAS-led NGO Anak which has been championing their interests.

Anak president Mazlan Aliman said there are Felda settlements in 54 parliamentary seats and 92 state seats.

"I think this time around there will be some shift, as the mood among settlers may affect states like Pahang, Johor, Negri Sembilan and Terengganu. I don't want to raise hopes, but there will be a significant shift," he said.

Even a 5-15 percent shift in political support had been significant in previous elections, Mazlan noted.

In 1990, the fallout from the 'Team A' and 'Team B' split in Umno had an impact on the Felda vote-bank.

In 1999, following the political 'persecution' of Anwar Ibrahim, state seats in Jengka, Chini and Penor were among those that fell into opposition hands.

In 2004 and 2008, rising commodity prices negated any change in political sentiment.

In recent years, however, settlers have been left feeling that they have been shortchanged by Felda in terms of payment for the palm oil produced.

And where Umno is deemed to have failed to fight for Malay settlers' interests, Pakatan has stepped in with legal assistance that has seen a series of suits being filed with some success against Felda.

A suit involving Felda Kemahang 3 in Kelantan saw its settlers obtaining RM11 million after the Federal Court directed Felda to pay up.

Other suits followed - in Felda Maokil, Labis; Ayer Tawar, Perak; Sungai Koyan, Jengka and Bera in Pahang; and Serting and Jempol in Negri Sembilan.

Mazlan said more than 2,000 people have signed on as plaintiffs to date, and that claims against Felda exceed RM1 billion - a record in the history of the scheme.

"Umno has alleged that Anak had slandered them and poisoned the minds of the settlers. We are called parasites. But what is surprising is that, in the suits in Felda Maokil and Felda Serting, Umno members surpassed PAS members as plaintiffs.

"This is an interesting development because the settlers do not see Umno as fighting for their rights."

'Open support for opposition'

Mazlan expressed surprise that Felda settlers are showing keen support for parties like PAS and PKR.

"The idea behind forming Felda in 1956 was to gather Malay support for Umno and BN. Only five percent of the settlers comprise Chinese, Indians and those of other races," he said.

“In the past, settlers were afraid to be seen as openly supporting the opposition. Now they are brave and have come out in the open, as they feel betrayed and persecuted. They are seeking legal avenues to ensure justice.”

Anak itself has survived a period of being shunned by settlers and their families for fear of being blacklisted or boycotted by the rest of the close-knit community.

“Such is the nature of a settlement where those who do not support BN and Umno not only face pressure from Felda, but also from the community and Umno. That is why the settlers have feared attending opposition ceramah,” said Mazlan.

Today, though, more people are attending Anak’s ceramah, after seeing how the NGO has taken on Felda and organised opposition to the upcoming listing of Felda Global Venture Holdings Bhd.

This is in spite of Felda chairperson Isa Samad having “utilised Rela and the auxiliary police” to prevent people from attending Anak’s activities, Mazlan added.

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