

## **Batu Pahat likely pick for Soi Lek's comeback**

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**By Kuek Ser Kuang Keng**

ANALYSIS Batu Pahat in Johor caught public attention last month when Information, Communications and Culture Minister Rais Yaim revealed that a survey by his ministry showed that this parliamentary constituency has been categorised as a 'black seat' for BN.

Three others have also been similarly tagged in this southern state which has always prided itself as a BN stronghold - Kluang, Bakri and Gelang Patah.

Chua Soi Lek Batu Pahat talk crowd Rais' statement also set tongues a'wagging that MCA president Dr Chua Soi Lek would be the BN's 'white knight' to defend Batu Pahat, the state's second largest town, and thereby opening door to his return to Parliament and the cabinet.

Born and educated in Batu Pahat, Chua served as a medical officer at its General Hospital and later opened a clinic there, before building up his political base in the town that is famous in Johor for its nasi briyani and asam pedas fish.

Not surprisingly, Chua is popular there. Most Batu Pahat folk will give the thumbs up when asked about the contributions of the four-term Penggaram assemblyperson and three-term Johor exco member - before they joke about his sex DVD that was secretly recorded in the town's top hotel in 2007.

Penggaram is one of the three state seats under the Batu Pahat parliamentary constituency. Chua enjoyed an over 10,000-vote majority in all his four electoral victories in Penggaram, before switching to the Labis parliamentary constituency in 2004.

But how did Batu Pahat, the birthplace of Umno, turn black for the BN?

Dr Puad Zarkashi The current Batu Pahat MP is Puad Zarkashi (right) of Umno, who replaced Junaidy Abdul Wahab in the last election and was subsequently appointed deputy education minister by Prime Minister Najib Razak, despite Puad being a first-term MP.

Puad bagged a substantial majority of 12,704 votes in the 2008 polls but his performance was pale in comparison with his predecessor's majority of 29,102 at the 2004 general election.

The staggering plunge of over 16,000 votes is believed to be caused by the Chinese electorate, making up nearly half of the voters in the constituency.

Batu Pahat is a mixed constituency, with 53.1 percent Malay, 44.6 percent Chinese, and 1.8 percent Indian voters (2008 figures).

Penggaram, which covers the Batu Pahat town centre, is the state seat with highest number of Chinese voters - at 61.82 percent (latest figure).

According to local community leaders, Puad failed to garner the support of the Chinese because of the proposals he raised during his stint as Batu Pahat town councillor, said to be unfavourable to the Chinese community.

Growing anti-establishment sentiment

The anti-establishment sentiment among Johoreans, who for long have been staunch BN supporters, continued to mount after the last election, especially among the Chinese voters in urban areas such as Penggaram.

Pakatan Rakyat has since listed Johor as a frontline state for the coming general election battle and has deployed national leaders to bombard the state with almost daily ceramah, inviting aggressive counter-responses from parties in the ruling coalition, which at times turned ugly.

In Batu Pahat, opposition ceramah featuring top Pakatan leaders have drawn unprecedented crowds. The latest, in Batu Pahat's industrial zone of Sri Gading last Saturday by PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim, drew a crowd of more than 2,000 people.

"Many of our family members and friends in Batu Pahat also see a big difference among the voters," said PKR Wanita central committee member Chua Yee Ling, who is from Batu Pahat.

NONEAnother factor encouraging Umno to hand its traditional seat to MCA in exchange for a safer seat is the popularity of Batu Pahat PKR division chief and central leadership council member Syed Hamid Ali, a younger brother of former PKR deputy president Syed Husin Ali.

Syed Hamid (left), who is popularly known in Batu Pahat as Pak Hamid, was a student leader in the late 1960s, before he escaped arrest and joined the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) in the jungles.

He spent some years in exile before resettling in Malaysia in 1991 following the peace treaty between the government and CPM.

The 69-year-old veteran, whose wife is Chinese, is reportedly well received by the Chinese community.

NONEHe has been politically active in the constituency and is often seen with potential DAP and PAS election candidates in their door-to-door visits, portraying the image of a united opposition coalition, that is sorely lacking within local BN parties.

Although his leftist political background earns him the respect of members from his own party and other component parties, especially DAP, it may be a stumbling block if he tries to garner the support of the older Malay voters of Batu Pahat, the birthplace of right-wing nationalist party Umno, which was formed in 1946.

Chua formidable in hometown

However, many political observers believe, for various reasons, Chua would score an easy victory should he contest in Batu Pahat.

Among them are the formidable Batu Pahat MCA division, which has been helmed by him for more than 20 years, and his contributions to the town, especially the multi-million ringgit flood mitigation project implemented when he was a state exco member.

Also seen as very important is that his candidacy will help win back the ebbing support of the Chinese voters, the Achilles' heel of Umno.

The impact of Chua's sex DVD scandal on Malay voters is considered minimal in the constituency where Umno commands a strong election machinery and where the majority of the Malay voters are proud and thankful to the party.

NONEIn return, Puad may move to Ayer Hitam, the adjacent parliamentary constituency held by deputy education minister and MCA Youth chief Wee Ka Siong (left), who won with a respectable majority of 13,909 votes in the last general election.

The local Umno division has been lobbying to contest this more rural constituency as it has more Malay voters at 55.5 percent, while Chinese voters make up 40 percent (2008 figures). Puad will undoubtedly enjoy a better chance in Ayer Hitam.

According to an MCA insider, Wee, an outspoken and articulate youth leader who is well known among the Chinese voters, may be deployed to defend 'tougher to win' MCA constituencies such as Kulai or Tebrau.

Wee is Johor Baru MCA division chief and part of the state capital falls under Tebrau, the parliamentary seat held by another party leader, Teng Boon Soon, who has announced his intention to step down when his current term ends.

"If Wee is defeated, it may be good for Chua because his son, Tee Yong, will have one fewer competitor in the party echelon," said the party insider.

chua tee yong interview 110309 01 Tee Yong (right) was elected to Parliament in 2008, taking over his father's Labis seat, and was recommended by his father to be made deputy agriculture and agro-based industries minister when Najib reshuffled the cabinet in June 2009.

Both Tee Yong and Wee are seen as rising stars in the MCA.

However, Najib may not be too keen to field both father and son as parliamentary candidates, for he may have to appoint both of them as minister and deputy minister, if many of the MCA candidates fail to survive the next election.

"Umno always says PKR is a family party, Najib cannot do the same in his own cabinet," said an MCA observer.

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