

**Race for Selangor's rice belt heats up**  
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**By Nigel Aw**

Visitors to north-western Selangor would normally expect to be treated to sights of its lush green paddy fields, flickering fireflies or perhaps, warily, a crossing cow or two.

But last Sunday, the sleepy town of Kuala Selangor was unusually active, as the town's stadium played host to carnival which saw some 70,000 visitors from sunrise to sunset.

The event, organised in conjunction with the fourth anniversary of the Pakatan Rakyat's rule in Selangor, was intended to thank the locals for their support.

While the urban crowd would have to be content with "thank you" billboards, the extravagance of the Kuala Selangor event suggests a serious attempt by Pakatan to make inroads into the north western 'rice belt', traditionally a BN bastion.

This area covers the district of Sabak Bernam and Kuala Selangor, famed for its paddy production and seafood. It consists of nine state seats, six of which are held by BN.

In order from North to South, they are Sungai Ayer Tawar (BN), Sabak (BN), Sungai Panjang (BN), Sekinchan (DAP) Sungai Burong (BN) , Permatang (BN), Bukit Melawati (PKR), Ijok (PKR) and Jeram (BN).

**Pakatan the underdogs**

Acknowledging that there was an ongoing Pakatan onslaught, Sungai Burong state assemblyperson Mohd Shamsudin Lias is confident in maintaining BN's foothold.

"It is clear that after 2008, the rakyat's support has swung back to BN and we should be able to defend our position and increase our majorities," he said.

This confidence owes to the fact that the area has consistently voted for BN since the coalition was formed in 1972.

Prior to 2008, the only time Pakatan made headway in the state's rice bowl was in 1999, when two state seats fell to PAS following the fallout from the reformasi movement.

One last exception was when DAP won Sekinchan in 2004 and successfully defended the seat in 2008.

**'Stomping ground for PAS'**

PAS is expected to lead the charge on the north western front as it will contest five of the six BN-held seats while the other, being Permatang, will be contested by PKR.

Gains in the rice belt would allow Pakatan to capture two-thirds majority in the state and help PAS towards equal representation to its coalition partners in the Selangor legislative assembly.

Presently, Pakatan is four seats short of a two-thirds majority in the 56-seat state assembly, with PKR and DAP both holding 13 seats each while PAS has 7 seats.

According to Selangor PAS commissioner Dr Abdul Rani Osman (left), both PAS and BN have engaged the same research organisation with similar results - that the battle would be in the rural heartland,

including the north western region.

"We are focusing on the periphery with our Semarak Hijau programmes such as Futsal games and medical checkups that allows our candidates to connect with the rakyat," said Abdul Rani, who is also the Meru state assemblyperson.

Based on the feedback, Rani said, PAS is confident it can make inroads in at least four state seats, namely Sungai Ayer Tawar, Sabak and Jeram and Sungai Burong.

Fishing for discontent

Though former Selangor Menteri Besar Khir Toyo has been sentence to a year's jail for graft and is not expected to re-contest in Sungai Panjang, PAS is unlikely to capture the seat as BN's influence remains strong.

Despite the tide of discontent in the 2008 general election which saw many BN state assemblypersons' majority slashed, Khir bucked the trend and managed to increase his majority in Sungai Panjang from 5,460 to 5,860 votes.

It is understood Sungai Besar Umno Youth chief Budiman Mohd Zohdi will be fielded as a replacement candidate there and will ride on the 'Khir wave' to retain the seat.

Sekinchan state assemblyperson Ng Suee Lim said though discontent against BN has subsided compared to 2008, particularly among Malay voters, it was hoped that the Pakatan-led state government's slew of welfare programmes can win them over.

He adds that Khir's departure has somewhat weakened BN's grip in the region, and Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak appears reluctant to allow deputy Selangor BN chairperson Noh Omar to take over, instead choosing to personally helm the state.

Ng said Noh who is a polarising figure there may allow Pakatan to capture Sungai Ayer Tawar and Sabak where the fishermen, an important voting bloc, are unhappy with the agriculture and agro-based industry minister.

Last June, Noh and deep-sea fishermen had been at loggerheads after the former announced the abolition of their diesel subsidies.

Noh in a briefing to BN MPs last month had lamented the lack of support from the fishing community despite the amount of federal funds being poured into their area.

Najib, under this year's budget, had also allocated some RM300 million targeted specifically at fishermen.

The two said seats fall within the parliamentary constituency of Sabak Bernam (BN) which is expected to be contested by constitutional expert Abdul Aziz Bari who was last year triggered an academic freedom protest after he was suspended for commenting on the Sultan's powers.

The other three parliamentary seats in the state's rice bowl are Sungai Besar (BN), Tanjung Karang (BN) and Kuala Selangor (PAS).

Sekinchan tightrope

However, Noh in an interview with Nanyang Siang Pau on Friday, was upbeat that BN can reverse its fortunes from 2008 in the state.

He told the daily that Umno will be able to capture 30 of 35 seats that it will contest, while MCA is expected to capture five of 14 seats and MIC and Gerakan will clinched one seat each of the three and

four seats they will contest respectively.

Umno captured 19 seats while MCA grabbed two in the last general election.

sekinchan transplant voter 151107 ng swee lim 2For MCA, its predicted improvement in performance will come from wresting Ng's own constituency of Sekinchan which he admits takes only a small swing to unseat him.

However, Ng (right) said based on the state government's track record and DAP's work on the ground, he is confident in fending off MCA's challenge.

Ng who had won Sekinchan in 2004 to become only one of two elected opposition state assemblyperson when BN ruled Selangor retained the seat in 2008, but against national trends, saw his majority fall from 344 to 190.

This, he said, was because after 2004, Khir had poured the state's resources into his constituency in an attempt to unseat the sole opposition state assemblyperson in a BN stronghold.

"But now we control the state government and we can give out allocations, not just BN can do this," he said.

Ending federal 'meddling'

A two-thirds majority, he adds, will enable Pakatan to amend the Selangor constitution allowing the state to appoint its own state secretary, financial advisor and legal advisor which is presently appointed by federal government.

mohamed khusrin munawi starts work as selangor secretary 030111Last year, the state government refusal to accept state secretary candidate Khusrin Munawi, appointed by the federal government, led to a constitutional crisis and a failed attempt to amend the Selangor constitution to restore the powers back to the state.

On fears of spike in new voters, Ng described the increase as "natural" in the north western region and said inroads here will help negate potential losses such as in Hulu Selangor, Puchong and Subang Jaya which has experienced unusually high new voter growth which he claims as BN election machinations to wrest back the state.

NONEMeanwhile, farther south, Bukit Melawati state assemblyperson M Muthiah expects to retain his seat and believes PKR will capture Permatang, the only seat the party failed to capture in 2008 of the three seats in contested in the region.

The other seat, Ijok is held by Selangor Menteri Besar Khalid Ibrahim, the sole Pakatan state assemblyperson in the rice belt to win with a four digit majority.

"Nationally there is a swing back to BN but from the 2008 political tsunami, the people have learnt the alternative Pakatan state government is doing a better job, I believe we have proven that," said Muthiah.

Rep: BN can't draw a crowd

He adds that with the exception of some land issues in Ijok which is in the works, PKR has hammered out most of the problems within the three constituencies that it will contest.

It is understood that Permatang will be contested by its state assembly coordinator Mohd Yahya Mat Shaari.

NONEPointing to a BN gathering in Kuala Selangor last year, Muthiah said if the coalition was confident

that Pakatan cannot penetrate its stronghold, then BN should similarly hold a Pakatan-style rally to gauge its support there.

"But they held it in the parking compound of Tesco to borrow the shopping crowd and managed to gather 5,000, if they dare, they should hold it in a stadium, the Selangor government does not prevent them from renting the venue," he said.

Though Pakatan's carnival last Sunday reportedly garnered some 70,000 locals and outsiders throughout the day, its night ceramah at the stadium, like BN, garnered an audience of about 5,000.

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