

Ghani counterstrike could 'paralyse' Kit Siang

MalaysiaKini.com

April 5, 2013

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ANALYSIS The surprising news that Johor caretaker Menteri Besar Abdul Ghani Othman could be fielded in Gelang Patah to square off with DAP supremo Lim Kit Siang has put DAP's campaign team on red alert, for the former could 'sweep up' crucial Malay votes in that parliamentary constituency.

Given that there are 52 and 12 percent of Chinese and Indian voters respectively in the semi-urban constituency, DAP was initially confident that garnering a majority of these non-Malay votes and slightly less than half of the 34 percent Malay votes should easily tide Lim over.

However, it is expected that Ghani could slash the DAP's Malay support to the minimum as Nusa Jaya, one of the two state seats under Gelang Patah, has a high number of civil servants, as it houses the state administrative centre of Kota Iskandar.

Ghani is seen by many Chinese Johoreans as a moderate and humble Umno leader, and the recent property boom in Iskandar - which is also located in the Gelang Patah constituency - has won him some applause.

Should the four-term menteri besar secure 85 percent of the Malay votes in Gelang Patah, DAP will have to rake in 80 percent of Chinese votes and 40 percent of the Indians' to defeat Ghani with a wafer-thin majority of 1.5 percent.

Since the announcement of Lim's candidature on March 18, the morale of Johor DAP has been high, attracting large crowds during statewide ceramah sessions.

Lightweight losing out

On the other hand, MCA - the party traditionally tasked to defend the seat, and its designated Gelang Patah candidate Jason Teoh - have been on the defensive since failing to contain Lim's growing momentum in the southern state.

Some believed that Johor BN needs a heavyweight to keep Lim busy in Gelang Patah, and that Ghani (left) provides the perfect choice.

Fielding the 66-year-old incumbent Serom assemblyperson in Gelang Patah, could effectively 'paralyse' Lim and reduce the potential threat of a statewide political tsunami into a localised storm, leaving Lim with no choice but to focus his campaign in the constituency to secure his own seat.

According to today's front-page report in English daily The Star, Ghani was said to have informed Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak that he did not mind offering himself as the

Gelang Patah candidate.

The report also quoted several Johor Umno leaders - Deputy Education Minister Puad Zarkashi, Johor Baru MP Shahrir Samad and Nusa Jaya assemblyperson Aziz Sapian - as backing Ghani in taking the radical step.

However, this strong support from his comrades may not be good news for Ghani.

To those who closely follow Johor politics, the tussle for the top job in the state has been brewing over the past few years.

Jostling for top office

Despite falling out of favour with former prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in the 2008 general election, Ghani held on to his menteri besar's post, apparently due to backing from the late Johor Sultan Iskandar Ismail.

The current ruler, Sultan Ibrahim Ismail, who ascended to the throne in 2010, is said to support Higher Education Minister Mohamed Khaled Nordin in taking over the state leadership. This belief grew wider after the ruler attended the Khaled's Hari Raya open house in 2011.

According to Sin Chew Daily, the sultan again appeared at Khaled's Hari Raya open house last year - a significant sign as it was the only open house he attended.

Khaled also has the backing of his former boss Shahrir Samad, who is a popular figure in Johor Baru.

Khaled (right) was Shahrir's political secretary from 1983 to 1987 when Shahrir was federal territories minister.

Puad is known to be a supporter of deputy BN chairperson Muhyiddin Yassin, who has held the Johor parliamentary seat of Pagoh for many terms.

Another possible candidate to succeed Ghani is state exco member Ahmad Zahri Jamil, the number two in the Johor state government, who is also a staunch supporter of Muhyiddin.

Hence, nudging Ghani to Gelang Patah could be one of the strategies of his political rivals within the party to end his three-decade long political career.

Even if he contests at both parliamentary and state levels and manages to retain his Serom state seat, his defeat in Gelang Patah would trash his chances of continuing as menteri besar.

In Gelang Patah, the stakes are high and sharp for both political giants.

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