

## **Free dinners and money politics in Penang?**

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**By Susan Loone**

The Election Commission has yet to announce the dates for nomination and voting, but the campaign heat is at full blast in Penang since Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak announced the dissolution of Parliament on April 3.

While Pakatan Rakyat has gone around the state organising ceramahs, with some announcements on candidates for parliamentary seats after the Penang assembly was dissolved on April 5.

The BN has since last month been hosting free dinners for residents all around the island and the mainland.

Residents in the Bukit Bendera parliamentary constituency say the BN parties have been hosting these dinners on a daily basis in different localities, with some giving away free gifts in their efforts to regain support from Penangites.

Apart from the free dinners, 1Malaysia raffle tickets have been given out at several markets, with prizes worth RM500 for some 200 winners on a daily basis.

Word is that a well-connected businessman has been funding these activities, supposedly organised by NGOs or residents' groups, and largely held in the Bukit Bendera parliamentary constituency under which three state seats fall - Kebun Bunga, Pulau Tikus and Tanjung Bungah.

DAP holds the Bukit Bendera parliamentary seat and the state seats of Pulau Tikus and Tanjung Bungah, while Kebun Bunga is represented by PKR.

Responding to these BN activities, the DAP said its opponents are indulging in money politics to win votes and sees this as a plausible threat.

Caretaker Chief Minister and DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng sees trouble for Pakatan as the party has obtained information that the amount BN is spending in Penang for GE13 will be 10 times more than that spent in the 2008 general election.

"If they give away money, people are sure to take it and this will eventually cause trouble to Pakatan," Lim said.

"We heard that someone has put in tens of millions of ringgit for the BN election campaign and this might affect Pakatan. We may lose the election.

"In the past, this person (who is well-connected) did not come out and spend money like

this. He is doing this now to topple the Pakatan (state) government.

"Do not belittle the effect of money politics. We need to tell people that change brought by money is not something good, we need to tell people that we are asking for change in Putrajaya, and not the Penang government."

Lim had said this yesterday when launching DAP's 'Ubah' cars, the party's mascot for the election, which are locally made. The MCA recently distributed its panda bear toys in Penang.

'Dinners paid with BN coordinators' fund'

Last night, Malaysiakini attended one of these BN "free dinners" at Jalan Halia in Mount Erskine. Dubbed 'Neighbourhood Nite', the dinner was attended by about 500 people who were entertained to performances by several cultural groups.

Gerakan Bukit Bendera coordinator H'ng Chee Wei denied that the dinners are funded by "a wealthy businessman", and declined to comment on those hosted by other BN parties, such as the MCA.

H'ng said the dinners organised by him and his colleagues are paid for with the BN coordinators' fund.

"These dinners are to strengthen relations among residents in the area. It is what they have been asking for, and we come here so they can bring up their issues where we can try to help," he said.

"I have been organising such dinners even since 2007, so it is not really only for election purposes or to win votes."

In his speech, H'ng warned his audience against reading news on Internet portals, saying one must be able to discern what is real and false.

Pulau Tikus assemblyperson Koay Teng Hai said the BN dinners have been organised in his constituency by various groups masquerading as NGOs, with messages such as 'Pure Love' and showing open support for the BN candidate for Pulau Tikus, Rowena Yam.

"These dinners certainly have an agenda as they are doing these now, with the election on. Some people are definitely going to be influenced," Koay told Malaysiakini.

"We will not stop people from attending these dinners, but we hope they will be able to compare the past BN administration with Pakatan's five years in Penang and remember what we have done."

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