

## **Samy still the muscle in Sungai Siput?**

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**By Ram Anand**

GE13 WATCH Former MIC president S Samy Vellu is confident that he would be able to help deliver the Sungai Siput parliamentary seat back to the BN, and he has set up camp there over the past few months.

Speaking to Malaysiakini over the phone yesterday, he seemed confident and optimistic that his work on the ground in Sungai Siput, where he had stayed for the past 90 days, will help the coalition wrest back the seat from incumbent MP, PSM's Dr Michael Jeyakumar.

Samy lost his long-held seat in the constituency in the 2008 political tsunami, whipped by Jeyakumar with a 1,821 majority vote.

"To date, we have had over 120 meetings among community leaders here," he said, seeming happy with the kind of reception he has received since the return to his old hunting ground.

"I am rather surprised myself. I came back here after almost five years, and people still remember me well," he chuckled.

But he was very clear in his mind about not sticking around after helping to deliver the seat to BN's candidate, who is most likely to be caretaker deputy minister in Prime Minister's Department, SK Devamany.

"That won't be good, to help the candidate win and then stay. I have my own work you know, I will leave after the elections," said the rather upbeat former works minister, who was MIC president for 31 years before stepping down in 2010.

He was appointed special envoy for infrastructure to India and South Asia following his electoral defeat.

Even at the time of speaking, Samy had just finished attending another event with the residents of Sungai Siput, which lies some 25km either way from Perak's capital, Ipoh, and its royal capital, Kuala Kangsar.

He said that his message to the constituents is just one; to give BN "a chance".

"I tell the people the government is able and willing to help," he said, complaining that the constituency had hardly changed in his five-year absence.

"Nothing has changed. All this while, the people needed help but they did not know who to go and ask for. Now we are here listening to their needs," said Samy, who is also BN coordinator for Sungai Siput.

Incumbent not bullish

Jeyakumar, meanwhile, confessed to having difficulty in competing with BN's money and readily admit that PSM and Pakatan Rakyat are not so bullish about their chances of retaining the seat they surprisingly won in 2008.

"There are people who are not happy because we don't give money. We don't have the kind of money to give out. But we are doing a different kind of politics," he told Malaysiakini.

This, he said, includes a more service-based approach of helping the people with land, farming and resettlement issues, which is something PSM has been renowned for doing.

"This is not an easy seat to win," he said, claiming that he himself had found it hard to judge ground sentiments as to whom the people favoured.

"Sungai Siput people are very polite people. If they like you, they tell you they like you. If they don't like you, they don't tell you. They still smile," added Jeyakumar, a medical practitioner, who had clashed with Samy in the last three elections.

Being a local and recognisable face is something that is crucial in a small town like this, where there is a generous non-Malay population. Chinese make up 39 percent of the electorate, Malays 33 percent and Indians 21 percent.

But Dr Jeyakumar does not think the possibility of Devamany contesting Sungai Siput, leaving his own long-held Cameron Highlands seat, would be an advantage to him.

"He's not unknown here. He has been a teacher in this area. He served for a long time as a teacher in Ipoh as well. He's quite a familiar face, too."

However, which way Sungai Siput will sway seems to lie in how much influence Samy still exercises over this well linked and sleepy semi-urban town that's a breeze getting around.

But in Jeyakumar's own words, the people here are too polite to indicate their displeasure at any party.

The answer might have to wait till polling day, as there's no discounting the electorate that delivered arguably the biggest upset of the 2008 elections, may change its mind this time around.

