

## **Kit Siang walks the tightrope between ethnic groups**

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ANALYSIS With the stage officially set for the clash of two political giants, DAP parliamentary leader Lim Kit Siang and caretaker Johor Menteri Besar Abdul Ghani Othman, stiff competition is expected in the race to win the hearts of some 100,000 votes in the Gelang Patah parliamentary constituency.

Despite Kit Siang claiming on Thursday that he is the underdog in this grand battle with 45 percent of winnability compared with 55 percent for Ghani, the former is in a commanding position based on the racial composition of the Chinese-majority constituency.

Judging from the overwhelming response shown by Chinese voters in DAP's daily ceramah and the lukewarm reaction towards Pakatan Rakyat in Malay areas, it is obvious that the political divide in the constituency is drawn along ethnic lines.

Both Ghani, who is from a race-based ruling party, and Kit Siang, who leads a Chinese-dominant opposition party, are facing the same problem of gaining ground with other ethnic groups.

Assuming that the 12 percent Indian voters are equally split and both Ghani and Kit Siang manage to secure the same percentage of votes from their respective ethnic groups, Kit Siang would be the winner as Chinese make up 52 percent of the total voters, 18 percent higher than the Malays.

The rationale behind the 'loaning' of the seat to Umno by MCA, which was fully aware that it would upset the supporters of its designated candidate Jason Teoh - a local warlord who has pumped in millions of ringgit into the constituency in the past five years, is that Ghani can sweep the Malay votes and enjoy higher support from Chinese voters compared to Teoh.

Teoh's supporters claimed that he was dropped by the BN leadership because the latter's claim that intelligence reports showed that he can only secure 15 percent of Chinese votes.

Ghani's strength, however, is largely dependent on several factors.

Many believe that Ghani, who still holds the top job in the state, can mobilise the powerful state government machinery to move his campaign.

However, being an outgoing menteri besar and not certain of being appointed to any ministerial post in Putrajaya should he and BN win, can he still offer development projects and fulfill election promises to the constituents?

Most importantly, will Umno warlords and other component parties, long time practitioners of patronage politics, lend their full support to the 66-year-old veteran who is seen as on his way out of Johor's mainstream politics?

BN strength - election goodies

Election goodies and campaign machinery have always been BN's strength in rallying the support of the rural and low-income Malay voters.

In terms of Chinese voters, Ghani needs to rely on his Chinese officials and the MCA machinery to blunt the burning anti-establishment sentiment.

Unfortunately, Ghani just lost another important runner when his special affairs officer cum Pasir Gudang Gerakan division chief Ker Ching Sheng, slated to contest Skudai, the state seat under Gelang Patah, exploded in a public outburst against his party's decision to give the seat to little-known Liang Ah Chy of the MCA.

"If they (Gerakan members) become emotional, they may vote against BN," he warned on Thursday.

According to him, Gerakan has 5,000 members across Gelang Patah.

Although Teoh has declared his support for Ghani after several days of sulking, his self-claimed 600-strong campaign team can only manage 15 percent of Chinese votes, according to BN's assessment.

On the other hand, Kit Siang's political career is still at its peak, and he is still seen as an indispensable and highly-respected leader in the party that he has led for 44 years.

The strength of his machinery, part of which accompanied him from Kuala Lumpur, has been proven in the statewide daily evening ceramah in the past two weeks, attracting crowds of hundreds if not thousands of excited Chinese.

DAP's campaign team, especially its members from the party's national headquarters which has fought more than a dozen by-elections and a state election since 2008, is known for its creativity in publicity and ability to fan the Chinese

electorate's sentiments.

In contrast, Ghani kicked off his campaign with a walkabout in Gelang Patah new village only on Friday.

Nevertheless, Kit Siang's campaign is not without challenge, especially in engaging Malay voters.

"Some Malay voters in kampung areas crumpled up our leaflets in front of us and chased us away from their homes when we did house-to-house visits," a DAP campaigner said in describing to Malaysiakini the hostility faced by the party in the Malay hinterland.

Some DAP campaigners also complained that the performance of the machinery of PKR and PAS is not up to the mark with their central leadership not paying as much attention to the southern state compared to DAP's, although the coalition considers Johor as a front-line state.

"We asked them to accompany us to distribute leaflets outside a mosque after Friday prayers, but they told us just leaving the leaflets on the vehicles outside the mosque would do," said another DAP campaigner.

Inability to recruit Malay members

From another perspective, it exposed the weakness of DAP in Johor - the inability to recruit Malay members despite making repeated announcements since 2008 that the party must walk out from the non-Malay comfort zone.

There were even suggestions to 'hire' full-time campaigners from PAS to accompany their workers when campaigning in Malay villages.

The racial polarisation in Johor also raises a dilemma for Kit Siang (far left).

The more aggressive his campaign is, and the bigger the crowd at his ceramah is, the higher the risk that it would trigger a sense of insecurity within the Malay electorate.

"The Malays in Johor are unique. They are more nationalist and sensitive to the actions of other races.

"When they see big numbers of Chinese gathering, they will feel suspicious and insecure," a Johor PAS leader told Malaysiakini.

How to strike the perfect balance that can deliver a victory is the litmus test for not only Kit Siang, but also for Pakatan Rakyat if the BN stronghold is to be dented.

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