

PKR underdog threatens to unseat Umno Youth No 2

MalaysiaKini.com

April 30, 2013

By Nigel Aw

GE13 WATCH JOHOR Despite the tide of anti-establishment sentiment among the Chinese community, BN in Johor can hope to mitigate its losses by maintaining its hold on Malay-majority seats where it still has significant support.

However, even these seats are no longer 'fixed deposits' for the ruling coalition as the ground has begun to shift in certain areas, and the parliamentary constituency of Muar is one such example.

At first glance, Muar - which is comprised of 62 percent Malays, 35 percent Chinese and one percent Indian - looks like a typical BN stronghold, but its largely urban and semi-urban make-up will see the ruling coalition face a serious challenge in this general election.

Even though incumbent Muar MP Razali Ibrahim, who is also deputy Umno Youth chief, won his seat by a 4,661-vote majority in 2008, BN's combined majority in its two state seats of Sungai Balang and Maharani - the latter which it lost - was only 1,860 votes.

This was due to the popularity of PAS candidates at state level, namely, Maharani's incumbent Dr Mohamad Taslim (centre in photo) and Sungai Balang candidate Malik Mohd Diah, who had worked the ground for more than a decade. This time round, the duo are working closely with PKR's local-born Muar candidate Nor Hizwan Ahmad, who has worked there since 2009 to close the split-voting gap and wrest the seat from BN.

"In the last general election, PKR and PAS did not cooperate for fear that the latter would scare away the Chinese votes, but it is different now, we are working together," Nor Hizwan told Malaysiakini.

As Mohamad, a local doctor, zips across Maharani for three kenduris over the weekend, he helps to introduce Nor Hizwan, urging the people to also back PKR at the parliamentary level.

Closing the split votes

"On top of closing the split-voting gap, I believe we will be able to increase our majority in Maharani which will also help us at the parliamentary level," said

Mohamad who won the state seat by a razor-thin 158-vote majority in 2008.

The well-known doctor's confidence is no over-statement as the reception he receives in Maharani - especially in the towns - has been very positive, with people willingly going up to greet him.

Mohamad added that Maharani has had a tradition of voting against the government and was in the past won by Umno's splinter party, Semangat 46.

On average, PAS managed to capture up to over 40 percent of the Malay votes in the state seats while PKR only managed to bag slightly more than 30 percent at the parliamentary level due to split voting, but it is still higher than the Johor average of 20 percent.

"The Malays here are different, if you travel from one area to another, you can see houses dotting the road, it is very interconnected and quite urban so they are more open to alternative views," said Mohamad.

Hizwan (left in photo) hopes that by closing the split-voting gap, coupled with the strong anti-establishment sentiment among the Chinese community, it can help flip the seat in favour of Pakatan Rakyat.

The 30-year-old candidate has no problems making jokes with the local Chinese uncles and proudly trumpets his adopted Chinese name "Yi Zhi Wang" (Hizwan) which means lots of prosperity.

Hizwan's campaign also works closely with DAP in neighbouring Bakri to shore up his Chinese support as the Muar town is divided by the parliamentary constituencies of Muar and Bakri and voters there tend to overlap.

If Pakatan can capture 75 percent of the Chinese vote and close the split-voting by obtaining just under 40 percent of the Malay vote like PAS did in 2008, it is likely to capture Muar.

New voters will tilt the balance

However, the final hurdle involves the over 7,000 new voters whose voting sentiments cannot yet be predicted, but Hizwan, who is the youngest PKR candidate in Johor, is banking on these new and young voters to seal his victory.

Nevertheless, his opponent Razali (left) is no pushover, as the deputy youth and sports minister has strong links to local youth associations, having organised

various events such as cycling and drag racing carnivals in his constituency to woo the youths.

"I believe we have done enough for the youths. As deputy minister, I can help organise programmes for the youths here and I have also met with local youth associations.

"They have pledged their support and I told them it's not a matter of what they will get, but what they want; I can help guide them," Razali told Malaysiakini.

The 43-year-old politician had also steered clear of any controversy while in office and is known as a "nice guy" among the locals as he dishes out allocations, including to the local Chinese community.

While goodies are unlikely to stem the anti-establishment tide, it could prevent Pakatan from maximising their support within the Chinese community, especially among the elderly.

Furthermore, despite BN losing its grip on the Malay voters in the state constituency of Maharani, it still has strong control over the more rural state constituency of Sungai Balang where Razali's own home is. Two towers wrapped in BN flags, that loom over the neighbourhood there is a testament to this.

Not quite a stronghold

"This area is considered a BN stronghold, it is difficult but we must also try to make inroads here to improve our chances of winning Muar," said Hizwan after he attended a ceramah kelompok (group ceramah) there which only had an attendance of about 40 people.

In the last general election, despite Sungai Balang having a large Malay-majority at 72 percent followed by 27 percent of Chinese, PAS only lost the seat by a 2,018-vote majority, indicating that it received at least 35 percent of the Malay vote even though it is a BN stronghold.

This pales in contrast to other BN strongholds in rural regions across Johor where the ruling coalition's support from Malay Malaysians can hit up to 85 percent or more.

Felda settlements and army camps, traditional vote banks for BN, are also absent from the parliamentary constituency of Muar.

While Razali's (right in photo) position as deputy minister means he still has the upper hand in the race for Muar, its changing face into a more urban constituency means that the Umno Youth No 2 is facing a serious challenge from Pakatan and the possibility of losing the seat in this general election is real.

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd
Source: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/228523>