

Ijok, Ijok again!
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AS I write, in the early phase of the Ijok by-election campaign, it seems to be a close contest. All the BN leaders who have visited the constituency sound cautiously optimistic. They seldom do during by-elections, choosing to boast of securing a bigger majority most of the time. This is bad news for the opposition.

Already the racial arithmetic has begun in earnest, as it must sooner or later in all Malaysian elections. There is not much to be gleaned from the English or other dailies. As usual, the Chinese language Oriental Daily tends to be more circumspective and informative in these matters.

The Malay voters who constitute about half the voting population seem torn down the middle again. The opposition candidate is a prominent Malay leader in the corporate sector. Anwar Ibrahim is on the prowl full time in the constituency. The BN candidate is a MIC green-horn from the minority Indian community. The presence of PAS in the local community is felt. In any case, the PKR candidate in the last general election won the majority of votes among the Malays, and that is a good basis for them to work on.

The majority of Indians there have voted for the ruling parties in the past. Unfortunately for the BN, the protest of the local MIC leader for not being selected as the BN candidate this time around has hurt the BN campaign. The chap may have shaken hands with Samy Vellu in a gesture of public reconciliation. But according to the Oriental Daily reporters, there is hardly any effective MIC campaign on the proverbial ground. The outcome in the Indian community is anybody's guess.

In these uncertain circumstances, the BN have banked their hope on the Chinese voters in Ijok. There are 2539 registered Chinese voters there, mainly concentrated in two Chinese New Villages, constituting about 20% of the total electorate. In the last general election, the voter turnout among the Chinese was 70%, and the BN garnered 65% of the Chinese votes.

Working relationship

Much of the BN fire-power is now trained on the Chinese voters in Ijok, and MCA as well the Gerakan have to bear the brunt of the campaign heat. As in all mixed constituencies, the small minority of Chinese voters have found themselves in the king maker role.

The opposition PKR is very much helped in the early stage by the presence of DAP big guns. I, together with many maverick democracy-loving Malaysians, hope that this is a precursor to the convivial working relationship between the DAP and the PKR in the forthcoming general election. We are positively tired of the squabble over seat allocation between these two major opposition parties in Malaysia.

In passing, I should inform my readers that Chegu Look has entered the fray in support of the opposition. Chegu Look Ting Yi is hardly known outside the Chinese circle in Malaysia, but among all Chinese persons in the country, he is an unassailable icon. As the former vice chairman of the federation of Chinese school teachers, his words carry weight with Chinese voters everywhere. I would like to think that he was partly responsible for the PKR victory in

Lunas six years ago.

As usual, whenever Umno and PKR clash in a big way, things get a little rowdy. Without having to be there, I know for sure there would be always the physical tension between these two camps. Sometimes campaign materials are destroyed. The windscreen of some cars would be broken. There may perhaps be more than shoving and shouting at times. Tension runs high, as the campaign heat peaks towards polling day.

It is not surprising that the police have moved in with the FRU to interrupt ceramah organised by the opposition. It is hard for the police to stay neutral even if they want to. The PM and the DPM, the two top men in the ruling BN, are their direct bosses. Then, there are all those outdated laws on assembly of citizens left over from the days when the government was fighting a communist insurgency. These laws are now employed to repress dissent. Without repealing those laws, elections in Malaysia can never be that free and fair.

Towards the last days of the campaign period, the election worker and their candidates must have been exhausted, physically and emotionally. Nevertheless, they must dig deep into their reserve, and step up the campaign to an even more feverish pitch in a last ditch effort to swing the undecided voters. In a close contest like this, the fence sitters are wooed by all sides. (In Sarawak rural constituencies, they auction off their votes to the highest bidder.)

More trouble can be expected on the crucial polling day. Things can turn unruly. There will be shouting matches and perhaps more water bottle wars at the polling stations.

Buses and other forms of public transport ferrying voters from outside the constituencies will certainly be scrutinised with a microscope by the PKR people, as they were in Lunas six years ago. The issue of phantom voters will continue to haunt our electoral system for many years to come.

On Saturday evening, a winner will be declared. He will be chaired by his supporters and pursued by the news hounds. The loser will try to accept the defeat with grace and dignity. Everybody will then go back to their normal life. Then what?

Not a meaningful indicator

This by-election cannot be a precursor of things to come in the next general election. The constituency is too specific to serve as a meaningful indicator of the average political mood of an entire nation. Besides, during a general election, the ruling and the opposition parties cannot concentrate their entire effort on one single constituency. A by-election is always unique. Its results say nothing much about future elections.

The ruling parties do not like to lose any electoral contest. They would like to see zero opposition in all states in the country. But surely, winning or losing this by-election - or any other number of by-elections - will not weaken their hold on near total power in both Selangor or in the Federal government.

Besides, the next election is near, and the winning candidate in Ijok will have less than two years to serve his constituents. Within that short span of time, he certainly cannot make much difference in the life of his constituents.

Most spectators obsessed with watching this by-election now will have forgotten about the Ijok by-election a month from now. People do have short memory.

The party that will be most affected by the Ijok by-election will be PKR. They have more or less languished in a kind of political doldrums after their severe set-back in the last general election in 2004, in which only the party president was elected to Parliament. A mighty shadow has been cast over the future of this party formed 10 years ago, supposedly to secure the release of Anwar Ibrahim.

If the premise that PKR was formed to secure the release of Anwar Ibrahim, then it would have no reason to continue existing after Anwar's dramatic release in 2004. But it has not been so. Political parties tend to have a life of their own at times, and not entirely subject to the whims and fancies of their leading lights. The historical forces at work are often much larger than the individuals running these parties.

Somehow PKR continued to exert some influence among what I would describe as the "middle-ground" Malaysians, constituting the "third force" among opposition leaning citizens, those who are not entirely happy with the hard-nose ethnic nationalism of the DAP, and the overtly conservative interpretation of Islam on the part of PAS.

Religious taboo broken

Then, in the recent Sarawak state election, the PKR scored a surprising victory in the Padungan seat in my home town of Kuching. Dominique Ng's victory there shows that the psychological barrier of race can be broken under the right circumstances and with the right strategy.

Dominique Ng's victory is particularly gratifying to PKR supporters because it also shows that the issue of Malaysia becoming an Islamic state by virtue of PKR's association with PAS can be overcome even among conservative Chinese voters, again with the right strategy and under the right circumstances. There in Kuching City, the PKR has also broken the religious taboo. It is a lesson in politics 101 that the DAP has chosen not to adopt.

The crux of the matter is multi-racialism. The concept is still a hazy one in race-mad Malaysia. Very few of my friends think that it will ever work here, as if racism is an incurable terminal disease, from which Malaysians who have been infected for half a century of the country's independence will never recover.

The PKR is an experiment in multiracial politics at the grass-root level, and Ijok the mixed constituency is the guinea pig. If the PKR can vastly reduce the BN majority, or even scrap through a narrow victory, then their quirky brand of multiracial politics will be given another breather.

Even if they achieve that objective, there is not much cause for celebration. The gargantuan challenge of the next general election awaits them, just around the corner.

As long as the PKR exists, it will be always a welcome variable to the political strait jacket of Malaysia. God knows we do need variables in a country, where everything political is so predictably boring.