

MIC's ray of light in Ijok
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His hair was in a mess, his shirt crumpled, fatigue etched on his face. Several days of rushing about, making countless of speeches and meeting hordes of people were beginning to take a toll.

But in the end, he pulled it off. To be honest, few, even among his adversaries and critics, would have doubted this.

The country's most talked about by-election bore testimony to the fact that MIC's 71-year-old president was still very much on top of his game.

S Samy Vellu proved that age had not slowed him down, his mind and tongue were still razor sharp. And as far as the MIC campaign was concerned, he was definitely its star.

The April 28 Ijok by-election was an acid test for the president and the new office bearers, deputy president G Palanivel, vice-president S Sothinathan and secretary-general Dr S Subramaniam.

It had been barely a year since the party had witnessed a bitter feud, which had threatened to rip it apart.

Samy Vellu had decided to purge his long-time deputy and nemesis S Subramaniam once and for all. He threw his weight behind Palanivel for the number two slot.

Although the chosen one secured a comfortable victory, the wounds from that battle had yet to heal. Many, aligned to the former deputy president, still seethe in silent anger.

Caste politics

Factionalism is not new to MIC. From top to bottom, fissures and fault-lines were evident then and now.

On the surface, the party represents all Indians in Malaysia but it is an open secret that deep within its veins, runs the bane of caste politics.

"Apart from the common problems that plague political parties such as jostling for power and patronage, caste also contributes to frictions in MIC," said one party veteran.

But did such resentments affect MIC's campaign in Ijok?

No! With a crack of the whip, the president had all of them gathered in one place for a common objective - to ensure victory for their candidate.

"And deliver they did, the party's machinery performed remarkably well. Personal grouses were put on pause for 10 days (from nomination to polling)," noted one observer.

The MIC operations centre in the heart of Batang Berjuntai reflected this. Party members and

supporters were often seen scattered in the many restaurants and coffee-shops located in the vicinity.

Seated in small groups, some murmured their discontentment with the president while others had nothing but praise for him. But as soon as the Volvo four-wheel drive pulled up, all of them dutifully gathered to welcome the president.

Iron fist rule

"Many feel that Samy Vellu rules with an iron fist. They complain that he remains in power by striking fear in those who nurture thoughts of dissent," said the party veteran.

"But with the problems in MIC and the type of people you deal with, an iron fist becomes a necessary evil. This is how unity is maintained."

"If you become president of MIC and adopt a soft approach, you would not last long. First of all, you would never even make it to the top," he added.

Samy Vellu, he said, is a man hardened by life.

"His is a rags to riches story. He endured many hardships and this moulded his character. He is strong mentally, emotionally and physically.

"There have been many criticisms against him but even his enemies would not deny that he is a first-rate politician, a master of the craft."

The Indian voters in Ijok were said to be rather disillusioned with MIC since their previous representative, the late K Sivalingam, had failed to live up to expectations.

However, when Samy Vellu hit the campaign trail, the sentiments began to change.

By the time the president and his men were done, the Indian voters had been convinced to give the party 'one last chance'.

Commenting on this, another long-time party member likened Samy Vellu to an alchemist in relation to his power of persuasion.

"When he hits the ground, it's like a tsunami. He blows people away. Give him the mike for a few minutes and he will turn lead into gold," he said.

Undisputed leader

MIC had come to campaign in Ijok in the wake of the president burning bridges with an influential local leader.

Former Kuala Selangor MIC division chief P Thirumoorthy had publicly vented his frustration for being overlooked by the president as a potential candidate for the seat.

He then relinquished his post, to which Samy Vellu had remarked that he was free to leave if he desired so.

Amid speculation of protest votes from the division chief's supporters, Thirumoorthy announced that he would back K Parthiban, the president's chosen candidate.

What prompted this change of heart remains a mystery, but the fingers point at Samy Vellu. As the by-election date drew closer, Thirumoorthy landed in hospital due to depression.

Ijok also witnessed a historical moment when Samy Vellu hugged his friend-turned-foe-turned friend again MG Pandithan on stage.

Pandithan, who is suffering from a serious illness, was a former vice-president of MIC. His ties with Samy Vellu became strained when he supported a rival faction.

He was sacked in 1988 and later formed the Indian Progressive Front (IPF), which he helms till today.

"You cannot cross Samy Vellu, that is the golden rule," said one of his ardent supporters.

"Love him or loathe him, as far as Indian politics in Malaysia is concerned, Samy Vellu is the undisputed leader.

"He has the power to change your destiny. Look at Parthiban. From nobody, he turned him into somebody. Samy Vellu is MIC and MIC is Samy Vellu," he stressed.

This was evident soon after the MIC camp learnt of their victory in the by-election. Supporters and members had mobbed the president instead of the candidate.

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