

Ijok, Ijok!
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We are now in a freak season of by-elections. Hardly has the dust settled in the Machap by-election in Malacca when the clash between the opposition and the ruling BN flares up again in Ijok, Selangor.

This time around, we are spared for once the spectacle of public verbal scuffle between the opposition parties, and PKR get to field their candidate without an ugly scrap with the DAP.

The DAP defeat at the Machap by-election was correctly predicted by James Wong before the event. Traditionally, the DAP can only hope to win when the Chinese voters in any constituency constitute a clear majority. For many years now, Malay and Indian voters always have a problem with voting for the Rocket.

If the by-election had been held in an urban constituency, say in Penang, Ipoh, Malacca, or even Johore Baru, then the DAP would have done much better. Machap is a semi-rural constituency, and winning a mixed semi-rural constituency would not be in the DAP forte for a very long time to come.

The question is why then would the DAP fight so hard with the PKR for the right to contest in Machap. Would PKR not be more suited than the DAP for a semi-rural mixed constituency like Machap? The answer to this question would ruffle many sensitive feathers with both parties.

This is not the time yet to delve into the heart of the matter. We just have to keep in mind that the resolution to this potential conflict between these two prominent opposition parties will determine their gain and loss in the next general election, as well as the future of democracy in Malaysia. It will be the severest test, not of their political acumen, but the maturity of their statesmanship.

On paper at least, the PKR stands a much better chance of winning the Ijok by-election than the DAP did in Machap.

Well known vs unknown

The majority for the BN in the last general election in Ijok was a mere 1,500 votes. In simple arithmetic, all that the PKR have to do is to swing some 750 votes towards the opposition, and they would bag the much needed gold this once.

They have a much more prominent candidate, the treasurer of the party, a man of distinguished corporate standing, and a local boy who has done well. He also seems to be a man of means, and the campaign funds should not be much of a problem. (Campaign funds have always been a problem with the DAP candidates.)

In contrast, the BN candidate from the MIC is relatively young, inexperienced in the ways of the world, and air-lifted from outside the constituency, causing murmurs of discontent among the local MIC leaders and members. Infighting during the sensitive period before nomination day will always destroy the morale of party supporters, and tarnish the image of the candidate among the electorates.

On the surface at least, the PKR candidate has an overwhelming advantage over the BN candidate. But elections, especially by-elections, are very complex contests. As the party flag bearer and the front man in this titanic struggle, the candidate carries quite a great deal of weight. The spotlight is on his every word and every speech, and an inadvertent guffaw will cost many votes. Most candidates are content to just go around and become a hand-shaking and smiling robot. The party machinery will do the rest.

Meanwhile, many factors will come into play as well. The campaign directors and their advisers are all old hands at the Sun Tzu's art of war, experienced in all manners of strategy in this attrition of propaganda. Actually the objective of any election campaign is quite simple: smear your opponent with the worst excreta possible, while blowing big long horn about the greatness of your own side.

In the case of the ruling parties, their greatest strength lies in the incumbency of government powers. This factor alone can carry the weakest candidate through the severest storm of political arsenals launched at him by the opposition.

Effective in Malay areas

Indeed, in the case of a semi-rural mixed constituency like Ijok, the ability of the PKR to mount a mountainous offensive is quite considerable. Unlike the DAP, they have the manpower and resources to attack on all ethnic fronts in a big way. I have witnessed their peculiar but effective all out war in Lunas six years ago.

PKR members are particularly effective in Malay areas. Man for man, they are the most formidable opponent, and perhaps the only worthy opponent, for the Umno election juggernaut. In Ijok at least, PAS has some presence, and this could threaten Umno traditional strangle hold on their Malay constituents there.

In the Chinese areas, PKR has some very credible leaders and dedicated members who are no less effective than the DAP campaigners on the ground. Then, they have that advantage in Chinese areas of presenting very prominent Malay speakers to bridge that ethnic gap, assuring Chinese voters that there would not be any May 13 or an Islamic state after an opposition victory. This is how they won in Lunas and in the Padungan contest during the recent Sarawak state election.

Unfortunately for them, PKR tend not to do so well in the Indian areas. Why this is so deserves some thinking outside the box, and some more concerted organisation on the part of PKR. The reasons must be more sociological than racial in nature.

BN seem wary of the threat posed by the PKR in this by-election. Their task of securing a convincing victory would be considerably harder than the Machap by-election. They may even lose, as in Lunas, especially now that Anwar Ibrahim, the tiger released from his cage, is now on the prowl.

Nevertheless, no matter how determined the PKR machinery is, they are working against overwhelming odds. In the electoral history of Malaysia, opposition parties seldom win by-elections. Lunas is the exception that proves the rule.

We all know that the ruling parties in the BN are all filthy rich, and their war chests seem inexhaustible. We also know that in any democracy, as in the United States presidential

election, the size of the campaign funds often determines the outcome. Voluntarism in politics is now rare. With huge election funds, you can mobilise whatever material and human resources to get the job done.

Above all, the BN enjoys the unassailable and unfair advantage of being in government at both federal and state levels. For many decades, they have deliberately created the public perception that BN, a political alliance of parties, equals the government. For some rural and semi-rural people, to vote against the BN is tantamount to an act of treason against the government and the state.

The Chinese language Oriental Daily has reported that even before nomination day, crews have been working day and night to pave new roads, install streets lights, and implement such other minor infrastructural projects. This sort of underhanded tactic will not work in a cynical, developed, and financially independent urban constituency. But in Ijok, as in countless semi-rural and rural constituencies, this may work wonders.

Different political horizons

In the backwater and probably long-neglected constituency of Ijok, improving basic amenities is what the local voters have always wanted and needed. We all know it is a form of vote buying. But unless there is a change of government, and election laws are amended together with a reform of the judiciary, this will always be practised with great efficacy.

The urban democracy-loving elite may blame rural voters for being bought so easily. But one has to understand that Malaysians living away from the fast lane of the cities have very different political horizons. The political reformers really have to work among them for a long period of time between elections, hooking their local concerns with national issues about corruption and reformasi. Then they will find that rural and semi-rural voters are every bit as smart as the cynical urban voters. In this respect, PAS has done well, particularly in Kelantan.

As the campaign unfolds in Ijok in the coming week, we can expect an avalanche of minor local development projects being launched and implemented by both the federal and state governments. This will not only be an instant enticement for some voters to support the BN, but will also further entrench the false perception that only the BN can deliver their development goods.

All things considered, the PKR should consider this contest as an honourable victory if they lose by a majority of less than 500.

After all, winning any election is one, and not the only one, objective of participating in a by-election or a general election. There are other concerns. We will discuss these other, more important concerns after the by-election is over.

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