

Saifuddin: 'Miracle of Lunas' in Ijok
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Beh Lih Yi

Pundits are already drawing a comparison between Ijok and Lunas due to the striking similarities in racial composition, the political scenario and the fact that it is yet another fight between the MIC and Parti Keadilan Rakyat.

PKR (then Keadilan) won the Lunas by-election in Kedah in 2000, one of the most bitterly fought by-elections in recent history, beating the MIC candidate by a wafer-thin margin of 530 votes while generating a tidal swing of some 5,000 votes.

Saifuddin Nasution Ismail, the Keadilan candidate in that outing, is going further - he feels that the 'miracle' of Lunas is likely to be repeated when the people of Iok, Selangor, go to the polls on Saturday.

"It is within our reach to win the seat based on several indicators," he told malaysiakini when met at the PKR election operation room in Batang Berjuntai, Ijok, on Monday night.

Saifuddin, who has kept a low profile since the last general election in 2004, has been in Ijok since last Friday to campaign for PKR candidate Khalid Ibrahim, 61, who is in a straight fight against BN candidate K Parthiban, 38.

The former Keadilan vice-president, who now resides in Kota Bahru and works for the PAS-led Kelantan government under a training and community project, has participated in the PKR ceramah (political talk) on a daily basis.

Saifuddin, 43, said he is not a member of any political party but described himself as a "supporter of PKR and PAS".

Asked on what prompted him to return to the limelight and campaign for Khalid, he replied: "I know Khalid and I know the qualities he possesses.

"Parthiban is good. He taught moral and physical education when he was a teacher. Khalid has an outstanding corporate background and is well-known internationally. I just want to let the locals know they have the opportunity of choosing the best of the best - and that is Khalid."

Parallels drawn

Asked to elaborate on his optimism over what he has seen as signs of the 'Lunas miracle' in Ijok, he drew several parallels.

"We can see the PKR candidate (Khalid) is well received among the Chinese community - it does not shy away from openly showing their support to Khalid. This pattern was very evident in Lunas," he said..

"As for the Malay votes, there is a split. Obviously, Khalid is more outstanding in terms of quality but the Malay voters here are in a dilemma as to whether they should vote for the candidate (Khalid) or the party (BN's Malay-based party Umno)."

He noted that the battle for Malay votes will likely determine the outcome.

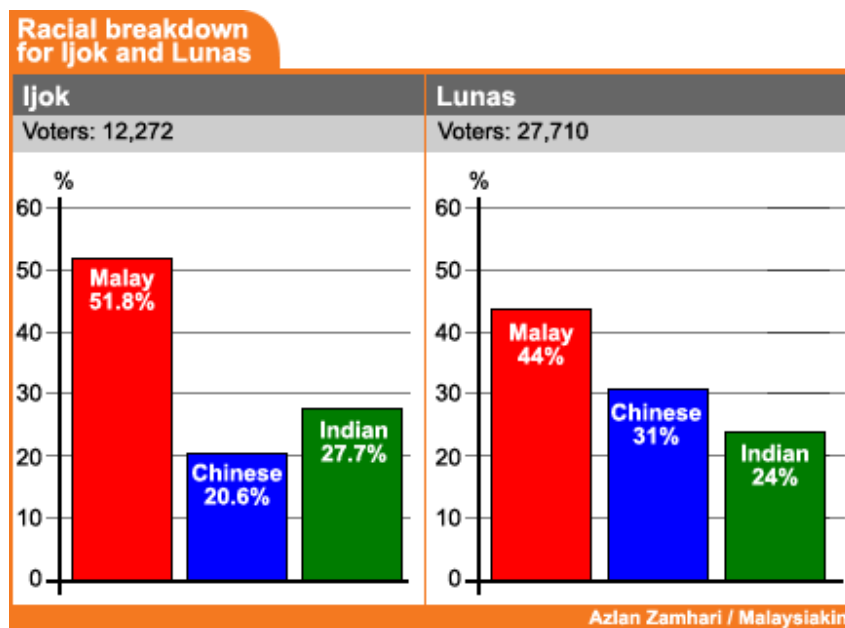
As for Indian votes, Saifuddin said the feedback is that PKR is making some inroads in this community.

"The PKR candidate in the 2004 election (Abdul Rahman Moharam) has accompanied Khalid to campaign in the Indian-majority areas and (Abdul Rahman) himself sees the response from the Indian community as being much better than in 2004," Saifuddin pointed out.

Other similarities are based on the contest between a PKR Malay candidate and an Indian candidate from BN's MIC; grouses among local Umno members over the candidacy; and the public sentiment.

"Two weeks before the Lunas by-election, the Jalan Kebun incident happened where the gathering was broken up in heavy-handed manner and activists were arrested. Recently, we've seen people arrested at the anti-toll or oil hike demonstrations (photo) - public resentment is strong," he said.

Of the 12,272 voters in Ijok, 51.8 percent are Malay, 27.7 percent Indians and 20.6 percent Chinese. Lunas, another mixed constituency, had 44 percent Malay voters, 31 percent Chinese and 24 percent Indian.



"Our winning formula in Lunas saw us gaining 60 percent of the Malay votes, 70 percent of the Chinese votes and 10 percent of the Indian votes," he said, expressing confidence that this could happen in Ijok as well.

Another sign being read in a positive light by PKR is that the BN thus far does not appear confident enough to state its target of majority votes for victory.

"In the recent Batu Talam and Machap by-elections, BN announced the majority votes it was aiming for, on the day after the nomination. They don't seem to have been as confident in

Ijok even after so many days of campaigning," he argued.

However, Saifuddin said 'irregularities' that have surfaced could be a cause of worry for PKR.

"The PKR election machinery has not been able to locate some 1,000-1,500 people listed in the electoral roll at the registered addresses. This is a huge number. There might be potential problems," he said.

If another parallel is needed, during the Lunas by-election, PKR leaders had stopped buses ferrying what they claimed to be 'phantom voters'. They will be out on Saturday to keep an eye on any 'suspicious' buses coming into the constituency.

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