

Pak Lah pays Ijok a surprise visit
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Soon Li Tsin and Beh Lih Yi

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has expressed faith that the Malay voters understood why an Indian candidate was fielded in the Ijok by-election after making a surprise trip to this political hot seat today.

With hundreds of Barisan Nasional supporters and local residents clamouring to get a glimpse of the country's leader, Abdullah made three separate stops to meet the people before leaving for Kuala Lumpur.

At a press conference in the MCA operations centre in Ijok, he said the Malay voters only want their grouses heard.

"As far as I know, Malay voters in Ijok understand what is needed to be done and we are aware (about this).

"They want us to understand their problems and their unhappiness over what happened in the past. I think now they can be confident with our candidate in this by-election.

"I believe that (BN candidate K) Parthiban will be a good candidate for us because seeing how he took care of his siblings after his parents passed away, you can't go wrong with this kind of character," he said.

Political pundits have recently commented that Malay votes were swinging to Parti Keadilan Rakyat's candidate Khalid Ibrahim, 61, largely due to their unhappiness over Sivalingam.

PM refuses to predict majority

Asked what he thought of racial issues being used, he said he does not encourage such tactics.

"Racial issues should not be used as bait for support. I believe that the rakyat understand that racial issues should not be used as a factor to win but instead be used to help the rakyat to develop the country.

"They already understand that playing up on racial issues had no meaning and benefit for us," he said.

Asked to comment on discrepancies in the electoral roll that have recently surfaced, Abdullah answered bluntly: "There is no such thing."

"What the Election Commission has is on record [...] they have done very well for the last so many years since independence. EC has done a wonderful job.

"We have always have election and have been fair for all and democratic and has enabled the people to choose the party they want, and the parties they've wanted so far like Perikatan and BN has been a successful party in developing Malaysia" he said.

Asked to predict the majority that BN expects, he laughed and said: "Don't ask me that."

He also urged voters to vote as early as possible on Saturday. The Ijok by-election sees a straight fight between Khalid and Parthiban.

Abdullah's visit resulted in traffic jams in the town area which lasted for almost two hours.

It is quite uncommon for the prime minister to be visiting by-election constituencies as the task of heading the campaign is given to the Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak.

There had been five by-elections, including this, since the 2004 by-election and Abdullah has only been campaigning in Pengkalan Pasir in Kelantan in 2005.

That, too, was a crucial by-election which resulted in Umno wrestling the marginal seat from arch-rival PAS, resulting in the Islamic party holding a razor-thin majority in the Kelantan state assembly.

BN getting desperate

Meanwhile, speaking to reporters later, PKR advisor Anwar Ibrahim said the premier's sudden visit to Ijok meant not everything was going well for the ruling coalition.

"I think he got the report that they are in a desperate situation and that his deputy Najib (Razak) and Khir Toyo (Selangor Menteri Besar) have failed to muster the Malay support," he said.

"So they have to rely on him and his personality especially among the rural voters," he added.

Anwar also said that he was pleasantly surprised by ex-premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad's tacit support for PKR.

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