

Penang: The importance of the Malay votes
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Penang is the only state with the highest Chinese population today but that may soon change.

There are signs now that the Malay populace is increasing rapidly and they could soon become the majority in the state.

The state's development blueprint released in 2005 has revealed this trend

It reported that the Chinese population in the state will drop from 43 percent in 2005 to 40.9 percent (2010) while the Malay population will increase from 41.3 percent to 42 percent over the same period.

Among the 40 state seats in the state, 14 are Chinese-majority, 10 Malay-majority while the rest are mixed areas. This shows that no single political party can rule Penang with the support from only one race.

Many Penangites feel that the opposition parties are not ready to make an impact in the state in the coming elections as they do not see any concrete effort by the opposition groups to integrate voters from different races.

Multi-racial front

PKR's Cheah Kah Peng commented that the weak position of opposition parties in Penang was due to communal politics.

"Most of the times, opposition parties are fighting on their own to defend the race they represent. BN wins not because it is strong, but because the opposition is weak."

Cheah added that PKR has a very important role to play as it is a multi racial opposition party.

Penang Gerakan state executive councilor Dr Toh Kin Woon also pointed out that a multi-racial front projected by the opposition was the main factor contributing to the DAP's strong gains in the 1990 election, besides the strong confidence of the people on Lim Kit Siang's ability as chief minister.

Meanwhile, NGO Save Ourselves coordinator Ong Boon Keong criticised DAP for its failure in rebranding its image as a multi racial party.

"DAP can only win in Chinese-majority seats. This has impaired voters' confidence against them since the party can never win the majority seats in Penang."

Ong also said that a straight fight was not enough for the opposition parties to win in the next elections.

"Look at the BN. Even in MCA constituencies, Umno members will help them to campaign. However, there is a lack of cooperation among opposition parties. If they are truly sincere with each other, they may win more seats."

Penang Suaram branch coordinator Choo Chon Kai commented that DAP would be stuck at a dead-end of communal politics if the party remains Chinese based.

Although DAP had tried to gain Malay support through the late Ahmad Nor, who is the party's former vice-president, it however did not succeed.

Penang DAP chief Chow Kon Yeow admitted that the party lacks prominent Malay leaders, but he explained that they have been trying hard to approach the Malay community.

"We always work along with other parties in approaching the Malays. In the 1990 general election, we work together with Semangat 46, later in 2000, we joined Barisan Alternatif and now our partner is PKR."

"Leaders of both parties have been participating actively in each other's activities," Chow said, adding that they will also help each other in the next elections.

Malay voters the key

According to Ong, the Malay voters will determine whether the opposition will take Penang or not.

"There is a clear swing of voters to the opposition in urban areas. However, there is the possibility of an upset if Malay voters in both urban and rural areas vote for the opposition."

However, Ong declined to predict how the Malay voters would vote in the coming general election in Penang.

In Penang, opposition parties hardly win in Malay-majority seats. The exception was in the 2004 election when PAS' Mohd Hamdan won Permatang Pasir.

Penang-born political analyst Tan Lee Ooi said Umno has successfully united the Malays through its manipulation of the "Malay being marginalised" issue.

"Some well educated Malays in the state are also influenced by the allegation because they feel that generally Chinese still enjoy higher economic status," he said.

Aliran's Anil Netto pointed out that not only the Malays, but the elderly and low-income group are also being marginalised.

"If this turns into a racial issue, it's too bad," he said.

All parties should debate on the globalisation effects on Penang, which include effect on migrants and ordinary workers, gap between the poor and the rich and privatisation, he added.

A former Penang PAS leader, meanwhile, does not expect to see much changes in the voting trend in the coming polls.

"There will be no drastic changes. I expect PAS to win two or three seats at the most. PKR may win one or two seats while DAP will perform better."

PKR however feels that with Anwar Ibrahim now leading the charge into the next elections, the

party will perform better. But there were also discontent about Anwar as he seldom meet party leaders in Penang.

Anil Netto said it will be an uphill struggle for Anwar as he will have to face the oppression of 3Ms (Money, Media and Machinery).

"Most of the media is under control. It will be very hard for Anwar to get the message across, especially without access to tv and radio air time.

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