

Heated competition in Malay heartland
Malaysiakini.com
Mar 07, 2008
Bridget Welsh

In the rich cultural capital of Kelantan, 62-year-old Ibrahim and his wife have driven to Kota Bharu to vote. Ibrahim is undecided. He says he will look at the candidates and consult his family before casting his vote.

MCPX

Ibrahim is typical of Malay voters with strong ties to rural areas in that politics is personal – the person whom the candidate represents, the personal relationships between a family and a specific party and the assessment of the personal touch of the representative.

Ibrahim, however, makes up the decisive share of voters in Kelantan (and Terengganu) that swing. Both PAS and Umno have their core of supporters, which can go up to 40 percent in a particular constituency, but both will depend on the swing 'from outside' to determine the outcome of the Malay vote in the rural heartland in tomorrow's election.

The main prize is the Kelantan state government. At play are four important issues. The BN campaign is focusing on pushing development. This old song resonates more with entrepreneurs such as those in the most populated constituency in Kelantan, Tumpat. The fight between the PAS secretary-general Kamarudin Jaafar and local businessman Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki, will be a tough one, since the call of economic development in this border region is strong.

dr awang adek hussinYet in areas where BN incumbents such as Awang Adek Hussin (right) made promises and the sophisticated Kelantanese split their vote to support him for parliament in 2004, promises were not delivered. This makes Bachok a highly competitive seat - a seat that the charismatic Kedah-born deputy president of PAS, Nasharudin Mat Isa, is fighting to win.

It is only in Umno supreme council member Mustapha Mohamed's seat of Jeli that the signs of development have taken hold, giving him perhaps one of the strongest BN positions before the polls. The BN campaign of '18 years is enough' only goes so far in winning over key supporters. Rather, it consolidates their base.

Thus, one sees another interesting tactic that the BN has adopted - direct competition over religious legitimacy. Umno signboards in Kelantan say they are the party of Islam and will carry on the struggle for the religion. Umno is appealing to religious legitimacy in an attempt to undercut the PAS strategy of tying their party's identity to religion. This move pits one form of Islam against another, yet the specifics for both are undefined.

For non-Malays in this state, Umno's appeal using religion illustrates the stronger growing prominence of religion for this party. Some non-Malays on the ground say there is no difference in the support for Islamic governance between the two parties. Others disagree sharply by highlighting supposed greed and immoral behaviour of BN incumbents.

Conditions tight

Thus, PAS is responding by drawing attention to the behaviour of Umno candidates, from

Awang Adek's expensive RM230 cigars to pictures of prominent Umno parliamentarians' Kuala Lumpur homes. At the same time, they have plastered the state with pictures of Tok Guru, the icon on humility and religious piety. Personal character is on display at the ceramah for both parties.

The contest is not just about religion. It is a contest about machinery. PAS' machinery is well-oiled as its candidates stay put in their constituencies working the ground while a throng of volunteers makes the engine of wooing support work.

2004 breakdown of seats in KelantanThe shock of 2004 has scared PAS into consolidating its base, and there is no question that they are focusing on protecting their position in Kelantan and re-building their base in neighbouring Terengganu at the expense of other areas in the Malay rural heartland.

Comparatively, of all the parties in Malaysia, PAS appears the most ready for the election, with its candidates selected early and its machinery in place quickly. They out-flag Umno in both states overall. Umno's machinery is similarly forging ahead, however. With massive resources behind it, Umno is pushing all out to win. Yet, the party remains deeply factionalised.

The divisions in Kelantan are perhaps the most divisive of any state in the country. This reduces the machinery's effectiveness, notably in places where popular and talented candidates were dropped, such as Zaid Ibrahim of Kota Bharu. Divisions have always been Umno's weakness in this state, and will continue to be so.

Money is intertwined with the machinery as both parties are using financial incentives to win voters, with Umno providing up to RM2,000 for a village leader and PAS providing a token RM10 in selected locations.

Machinery and money will not be decisive, since many in the local Kelantanese population have decided already. The key that makes this state interesting is the unknown, the outsiders, or rather the 'insiders' who return home. The appeals to voters like Ibrahim, who are subsidised up to RM200 to return to vote and provided transportation via the many buses coming into the state, are urgent.

BN and PAS both held meetings for Kelantan voters in KL and elsewhere. Both parties have registered voters outside the state, and the number of new voters is estimated to be over 80,000. These new voters along with traditional insiders living outside will swing the state for one party or the other. These voters are the ones driving back through the extremely busy roads with cars pouring into Kelantan.

One key issue will be the rumours of 'clone' voting which may call into question the results and be part of the new influx of voters. Evidence of this will be needed, however, to turn rumour into reality. Conditions on the ground in Kelantan remain tight, with six to eight state seats too difficult to call, and subject to the swing.

Fiery rhetoric

Further south in Terengganu, the BN's chances are stronger. The key issue at play is the decision of the menteri besar to drop four of the state division chiefs as candidates and replace them with his own men. The outcome has opened up Umno for possible defeat in some seats.

This includes the capital of the state, Kuala Terengganu, which pits the hardworking academic Dr Syed Azman of PAS against the contractor Razali Ismail. In the last few days, focus has centered on mending the rifts in Umno and ratcheting up the machinery. Voters in this state are being appealed by using the traditional honed techniques of resources and religion.

Outsiders are being subsidised up to RM100 to return. The messages in this state from both parties are qualitatively different, in that the focus is less on religion and more on development. PAS is hitting hard on the bread and butter issues, and increased cost of living in the state since Umno has taken government.

hadi awangUmno is returning with the promise of continued investment and pointing to gains in the north of the state in particular. PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang's fiery rhetoric is noticeably toned down, as his speeches speak of multi-racialism and national integration.

Gone is an overt focus on the Islamic state, although for many of his supporters there is still a strong belief in greater implementation of religious governance.

The battle lines in both states are clearly drawn. The stakes are high. The next 12 hours will be crucial as voters come into both states. Ultimately, how they swing will make the difference. Thus, in many ways the contests in both states are no longer regional contests, but a thermometer of national Malay opinion.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.
Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/79395>