

Will they bite the 'hand that feeds'?

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The battle for the 8,787 Chinese votes in Kuala Terengganu is now in full swing with both Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Rakyat pulling all the stops to ensure support from the community.
MCPX

Chinese voters were believed to have helped BN clinch victory in the Kuala Terengganu parliamentary seat during the last two general elections and all eyes are on whether they would reprise their role on Jan 17.

PAS, who is fielding five-term Wakaf Mempelam assemblyperson Abdul Wahid Endut, has practically left all the campaigning for Chinese votes to coalition partners DAP and PKR. This was confirmed by PAS deputy-president Nasharuddin Mat Isa yesterday.

kuala terengganu wan ahmad farid mohd abdul wahid endut azharudin mamatBoth DAP and PKR's machinery are being run by national-level leaders and activists who are holding scores of nightly ceramah featuring well-known opposition personalities.

DAP and PKR leaders are going all out to 'educate' locals on national issues such as corruption, the slump in the economy, the teaching of maths and science in English, the Internal Security Act and deteriorating race relations.

"A parliamentary by-election is not to gauge the state government. Instead, it is an opportunity for the Chinese voters to vote PAS as a protest against Umno and BN's bad policies at the national level," said Teja assemblyperson Chang Lih Kang (PKR) who has been campaigning here since nomination day.

The opposition ceramah in Chinese areas have been able to draw larger crowds than usual and DAP and PKR (activists) believe they are making a breakthrough just six days into the campaign.

Gov't has been 'fair'

On the BN front, particularly MCA, has a far better grassroots following among the Chinese community.

Unlike the opposition, BN campaigners are leaving aside national issues and banking on reminding voters of their long standing quid pro quo relationship with the state government.

The logic behind this is that the state government, through MCA, had looked after the needs of the Chinese community and voting for the opposition would be deemed an ungrateful act.

"The government is rich and has been fair in distributing the state's wealth. There may be

problems faced by the Chinese in other states but not here," summed up Terengganu Chinese Assembly Hall president Foo Chih Wan.

Foo said BN has shored up significant amount of goodwill from the Chinese community since PAS' religious conservative reign of the state between 1999 and 2004.

According to Foo, the Chinese community has enjoyed the benefits derived from oil royalties through the federal and state governments funding of schools, places of worship and Chinese guilds since 2001.

Election goodies

For this by-election campaign alone, a cursory look at the federal and state government pledges and distributions specific to the Chinese community total in excess of RM12 million, according to media reports over the past week.

The most significant allocation took place on Jan 5, a day before nomination day, where the state government distributed about RM2.7 million in cash to about 9,000 needy and elderly Chinese.

kuala terengganu by election 090109 hand over wang ehsan formThe RM200 to RM300 handout per person is an annual event which usually happens either a week before or after Chinese New Year.

Menteri Besar Ahmad Said has thus far pledged RM3.3 million for the construction of a hall for the Chinese community in Bukit Kecil, with the ground breaking ceremony slated for Jan 13.

The state government further approved RM2.8 million for the refurbishing of the sole Chinese school in Kuala Terengganu, SJK (C) Chung Hwa Wei Sin. The school's brass band will receive another RM200,000.

Another RM110,000 was allocated to 40 Chinese religious organisations.

In addition to the allocations from the state government, the state MCA has obtained federal allocation worth RM205,000 for two temples while Education Minister Hishamuddin Hussien on Jan 5 announced a RM2,926,000 allocation for 10 Chinese schools in the state.

'Don't bite the hand that feeds'

Several Chinese guild leaders when approached have expressed hope that Chinese voters in Kuala Terengganu would not bite the hand that feeds, especially since the community forms a mere three percent population in the state.

Chinese guilds in Kuala Terengganu are highly influential among the community and this has prompted high-profile meetings between BN leaders and guild leaders.

Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak himself held a closed-door dialogue with guild leaders for more than two hours on Friday night, while MCA president Ong Tee Keat and Gerakan president Dr Koh Tsu Koon held similar meetings as well.

Meanwhile, MCA appears to have another ace up its sleeve in the form of its state assemblyperson for Bandar constituency, Toh Chin Yaw.

MCA's campaign is portraying Toh as the sole Chinese representative in the state assembly whose position cannot be guaranteed should BN candidate Wan Abdul Farid Salleh loses.

Despite the odds stacked against them, DAP and PKR hope to ride on the wave of discontent among non-Malay voters to secure a victory in Kuala Terengganu.

Terengganu PAS supporters club spokesperson Chin Fook Cheen expressed confidence that voters would not buy into the 'candies' being doled out by BN.

However, Chin conceded that trying to get the young voters working in other states to return home to cast their ballots would be a problem.

"It is now very close to Chinese New Year. It is likely that many will be unable to obtain leave from work," he said.

A popular estimate is that about 2,500 Chinese voters are currently outside Kuala Terengganu.

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