

**On a mission to register more rural voters**  
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KUCHING - NGO activist Ong Boon Keong is a man on a mission but he is facing an uphill climb. Nonetheless, he is determined to soldier on and get more Sarawak's rural folks to register as voters.

Penangite Ong has been active since September last year. He started his work in Baram and managed to register 300 voters from seven longhouses.

Since then, Ong has helped to register more than a thousand cases of birth certificates and identity cards in Baram, Sri Aman, Bintulu, Belaga and Kanowit.

His next stop will be Lawas.

"60 percent of them were not registered but we cannot do anything as they were mostly without personal documents, so processing the personal documents comes first," he said.

Sarawak has the highest number of non-registration voters in the country, numbering as many as half a million. The figure of non-registered voters stands at 33.8%.

Working for Malaysian Election Observation Network (MEO-Net), Ong said it was a daunting task as he and his team has to deal with problems of assisting rural folks to process their personal documents instead of getting them registered as voters.

When he first started on his mission, he was told by the National Registration Department (NRD) that there were about 33,000 people in rural Sarawak without proper documents, either birth certificate or identity cards, or both. He was later told that there were 66,000.

He said NRD has also set up mobile units this year to go deep into the rural areas to conduct their registration.

Ong professes no political agenda in his work, only that he believes that everyone should have voting rights in order to see democracy at work in Malaysia.

There were a number of problems he had encountered. Many rural folks were not registered for reasons such as burned birth certificates, they were unable to pay RM200 for late applications, parents without personal documents and other issues.

After five mobile units were set up to register rural folks, the total number of registration collected by the NRD shot up to 145,000 in the first quarter of the year.

"This shows the huge number of people in Sarawak, who were not voters, was not because they did not want to exercise their voting rights but they were unable to do so," he said.

Ong said Sarawak has the highest number of non-registered voters. Of the 71 seats, only around 10 were in urban areas while the rest were in the interior. And many were not aware of the importance of exercising their rights to vote.

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