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# Winning the hearts and minds

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## BELLWETHER POLLS: Sg Besar race offers glimpse of Chinese mind ahead of GE14

**A**T the start of the Sungai Besar by-election campaign, a young officer working for a Selangor state executive councillor came up to me outside the nomination centre in this booming semi-urban setting.

I couldn't recognise him at first. He was equally surprised to see me among the sea of PAN/PKR/DAP members in their show of support for the Parti Amanah Negara (PAN) candidate.

Our conversation initially centred on his career. As it turned out, he used to work with me at a financial markets regulator before moving to the corporate communication department of a major carmaker.

A graduate of a public university, the boyish-looking man is hardly in

his 30s. But, he has been job-hopping and is now working for the Selangor government.

We then chatted about politics. He thinks it will be an uphill task for PAN or Pas to unseat the incumbent, Barisan Nasional, in Sungai Besar, given the three-cornered fight for the seat.

Rather, the battle for Sungai Besar has turned out to be a fight between Pas and its splinter party, PAN.

How both fare will also help determine the fate of the fragile PKR-led Selangor government, which also comprises DAP and Pas. It is a bigger electoral test for Mat Sabu and his fledgling party than for BN or Pas.

In a way, the Sungai Besar parliamentary seat is a microcosm of Selangor's electoral make-up. Excluding Petaling Jaya, Sungai Besar resembles other Selangor parliamentary seats. It is a semi-urban

seat with 67 per cent Malay, 31 per cent Chinese and two per cent Indian voters.

And, about 40 per cent of them are young, aged 39 and below. In fact, new and young voters form 16 per cent of the 42,655 registered voters.

Latest readings show that BN will romp home with a bigger vote margin than the 399 it got in the last general election.

The seat has been a BN stronghold except in 1999, when Pas broke the coalition's dominance by winning with a razor-thin margin of 156 votes.

The late Tan Sri Noriah Kasnon had held the seat since 2004 for three consecutive terms.

Assuming the Malay votes remain solidly behind either BN or Pas, the battle for Sungai Besar is down to the Chinese voters in DAP-held Sekinchan, one of the two state seats in the parliamentary constituency.

BN candidate Budiman Mohd Zohdi is the state assemblyman for Sungai Panjang, the other state seat in Sungai Besar.

Budiman says his walkabouts in the Chinese areas in Sekinchan have been well received. "The reception was better than in the 2013 general election," he told me.

DAP is working extra hard to win Chinese votes for PAN. In fact, DAP is working as if it is contesting in Sungai Besar.

DAP chief Lim Kit Siang even brought his newfound ally, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, to Sekinchan yesterday to address some 500 people, about 80 per cent of them Chi-

nese, at a Chinese restaurant.

Mat Sabu turned up late for the event, also attended by disgraced former Selangor menteri besar Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib.

There was not much fanfare despite Dr Mahathir's presence, which marked his first time campaigning against BN.

He spoke for just 16 minutes and the microphone failed thrice.

Whether Dr Mahathir can sway Chinese votes remains to be seen.

The Chinese turnout was partly due to some Chinese support for DAP. But, some of them were there out of curiosity, just to listen to Dr Mahathir. True enough, more than half the people left the hall after he spoke.

Today, Dr Mahathir is scheduled to take his fight to Kuala Kangsar, where BN faces PAN and Pas in another by-election. Again, he will throw his support for PAN, and launch another attack on the BN government and the Pas brand of hudud.

Will Dr Mahathir be remembered as a statesman after his 22 years in power or as a lightning rod for the opposition, out to demolish the government he once led?

It cannot be ruled out that Dr Mahathir, based on his actions in the past months, may be acting out of desperation to save his son, Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir, from political oblivion.

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**A veteran newsman**, Jalil believes that a good journalist should be curious and sceptical at the same time

