

Odds against 'betting for education' fund winning Chinese votes
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KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 17 — A Putrajaya-backed plan to pump up to RM20 million in gambling profits annually into Chinese and Indian vernacular education is unlikely to sway the Chinese vote back to the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN), pundits say.

The RM2.1 billion takeover of billionaire Ananda Krishnan's Pan Malaysian Pools Sdn Bhd by a consortium of Chinese tycoons led by Tan Sri Lim Kok Tay of gambling giant Genting last week, will also lead to profits channelled to "Jana Pendidikan" — a trust fund for vernacular schools.

But politicians and analysts told The Malaysian Insider that the purchase will not be seen as a government effort, or worse, a case of the Najib administration abdicating its responsibility to the education needs of minorities.

"I don't think this will translate into votes for Barisan Nasional at all. I fail to see any fundamental change in government policy toward mother tongue education," said Chinese educationist Kua Kia Soong (picture).

DAP publicity chief Tony Pua also agreed, pointing out that "all this time, Chinese businessmen have donated to Chinese schools, so what is the difference now that its profits from a company run by Chinese?"

The Singapore Straits Times had recently cited financial executives involved in the deal as saying that it could improve Barisan Nasional's (BN) standing among Chinese and Indians who swung away from the ruling coalition in the landmark 2008 election.

Datuk Seri Najib Razak, who is expected to call an election within the year, has been tasked with reversing losses that denied BN its customary two-thirds majority of Parliament and five state governments.

The take-over of the gambling company came just before Najib announced a parliamentary select panel to review the electoral system and an end to crude media censorship this week, in a concession to the middle class and urban vote after being criticised for the security crackdown on the July 9 Bersih rally.

Education has also long been a source of dissatisfaction from the Chinese and Indian community.

While Malays enjoy extensive state support for education including financial grants, scholarships and enrolment quotas in public universities, Chinese and Indian schools struggle each year for funding.

Kua said the government's cap on the number of state-funded vernacular schools has seen the number of Chinese and Tamil schools drop from 1,350 and 880 respectively in peninsular Malaysia at independence in 1957, to just 1,280 and 550 today despite their combined population doubling.

MCA leaders, including Deputy Education Minister Datuk Wee Ka Siong, told The Malaysian Insider that no concrete plans have been made as to how or whether these funds will be

channelled to state-funded vernacular schools.

"But we are always open to ideas on how the government and private sector can complement each other," said the MCA Youth chief, who has been the administration's pointman for Chinese education.

Political analyst Khoo Kay Peng said that BN was missing the point of Chinese concern over vernacular education.

"It is about recognition that it is an integral part of the community. It's not about funds or MCA just speaking up but being treated equally, not bucking it to the private sector," he said.

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