

Pakatan sees rural vote gain from NFC cattle scandal

The Malaysian Insider

November 26, 2011

By Clara Chooi

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 26 — Faced with Datuk Seri Najib Razak's moves to woo the urban vote by restoring civil liberties, Pakatan Rakyat (PR) lawmakers believe the National Feedlot Centre (NFC) cattle scandal comes at an "opportune time" for them to win over Barisan Nasional's (BN) traditional vote bank of farmers and rural folk.

The issue has cast a spotlight on the cavalier spending of public funds by minister Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil's family who runs the RM250 million project, at a time when Malaysians are forced to tighten their belts in a souring economy.

File photo of cows grazing in the National Feedlot Centre in Gemas. Pakatan MPs believe the NFC scandal, which is about cows, resonates heavily with kampung folk.

Among others, the scandal involves allegations that millions of ringgit meant to help Malaysia meet her demand for beef have gone to purchase luxurious condominium units, fund umrah trips to Mecca and set up Shahrizat's family's Singapore-based companies.

Since the scandal broke, the senior Cabinet minister appears to have shied away from the public eye, skipping two Cabinet meetings and a host of events.

"The NFC could not have come at a more opportune time when the economy is clearly slowing, commodity prices are falling and the prices of basic goods and services are rising," the DAP's Tony Pua told The Malaysian Insider.

PAS's Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad, noting that economic issues still remain a key factor in the tussle for votes, described the scandal as "a real gift" to PR.

He said such issues, if packaged well, would touch Malaysians of all socio-economic backgrounds, rural and urban alike.

"Corruption in government procurement, how much these wastages have hurt our pockets, made our lives more miserable... the kampung folk can relate to this," the Kuala Selangor MP said.

He said that "middle Malaysia issues", such as the push for greater democracy, individual freedom and electoral reforms, while important, largely impact the urbanites and middle- to upper-income groups, many of whom are already opposition sympathisers.

As such, he stressed that PR could not bank its hopes entirely on championing these issues if it wants to wrest the rural vote from BN.

PKR vice-president Nurul Izzah Anwar agreed that "middle Malaysia issues" are PR's "forte" and said that "if done right", Najib's latest round of reforms could spell a five to 10 per cent vote shift for BN.

But, she said, the "quarter-baked BN-approved Bills", like the Peaceful Assembly Bill tabled in Parliament on Tuesday, had lost Najib any votes gained earlier in his favour.

"This hurts him tremendously as the original intent from his Malaysia Day pledges was to win over middle Malaysia," she told The Malaysian Insider.

Najib appeared to enter damage control mode after his administration suffered international condemnation over its handling of the Bersih 2.0 July 9 rally and embarked on a campaign aimed at shining his reformist image.

After forming the parliamentary select committee for electoral reforms, the prime minister raised eyebrows during his Malaysia Day message on September 15 when he promised to repeal the Internal Security Act (ISA) and amend security and press laws to allow greater civil liberties.

He then moved on Tuesday to table the Peaceful Assembly Bill and two days later, promised to lift the ban on student politics, a move the opposition claims was designed to woo young voters.

But PR believes the prime minister's silence since the NFC scandal hit the headlines would still ring louder than his promises for reform.

"The scandal isn't just your routine financial scandal that tends to have little traction among the rural community.

"It is a scandal about cows which resonates heavily with the kampung folk who are more familiar with the bovine industry," said Pua.

"The association of a top Umno leader and family to the project will also cause Umno to lose further trust from their core supporters, he added.

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