

In Selangor, urban voters remain fickle
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KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 7 — The popular political view assumes that because people get greater exposure to ideas and information in cities, these areas are likelier to be pro-Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

After all, the Bersih 2.0 rally turned out to be a mostly urban event where the only positive publicity was on the Internet — which is widely available in cities compared to kampungs.

Khalid said Malay voters know that their problems are due to BN mismanagement. — File pic

Cities are predominantly young, almost by 65 per cent by some estimates, where adults migrate from the countryside to work and eventually settle down in. The youth vote also propelled the PR to take over four states in 2008.

But like the Malay rural profile, these landscape features — available technology, a more vibrant marketplace of ideas, youthful openness to change — underestimate the human capacity to mould and be moulded by prejudice and ignorance.

Mohamad Abdul Rahman, for instance, has a hard time breaking through the racialist mindset of the young, working-class Malays in Taman Templer, a diverse constituency in Selayang, north of the famous Batu Caves in Selangor.

Many young Malay factory workers, mechanics and clerks, says Mohamad, a local PAS leader, are caught up in the pro-Umno media-spread fear that Malays are under siege because of the PR. This is despite intensive PR propaganda efforts and state government programmes in Selangor cities.

It's the same in Petaling Jaya, Shah Alam, Klang and Pandan, where young Malays are expressing their disgruntlement through a racial lens, neutering PR's efforts to promote a colour-blind ideology.

Though cities may have all the hardware that define modern life, schools, infrastructure, money, entertainment, the software of an urban voters' consciousness is still shaped by the primal feelings of fear, of communal belonging and the need to survive.

The soft touch still matters

When talking to voters and residents of Pandan, on the borders of Kuala Lumpur, the frequency of a wakil rakyat's visit is repeated over and over.

So an assemblyman who has visited a surau or doled out aid to the needy gets two-thumbs up. Conversely, a parliamentarian who is a luminary in a major party and makes major headlines but hasn't visited voters is scorned.

For voters who have almost every physical amenity — roads, different types of schools, business services, shopping malls — the personal touch is what counts for a politician,

reasons Datuk Md Aris Md Yusuf, a former assemblyman for Chempaka.

Chempaka lies in the parliamentary area of Pandan which is the lower half of what is popularly known as Ampang. The latter is a sprawling suburb east of KL known for its gilded mansions in Bukit Antarabangsa and its large community of diplomats and foreign corporate high flyers.

Malay voters make up 58 per cent of Chempaka and it has been a traditional Umno seat until 2008. Md Aris served as assemblyman since 1990 but he wasn't fielded in 2008. The Barisan Nasional's (BN) Nosimah Hashim was defeated by PAS's Iskandar Abdul Samad.

One of the main reasons the BN lost Chempaka in 2008 is because voters did not know the new candidate, claims Md Aris, who had served the constituency for four terms.

"But while they rejected the BN candidate for the state seat, they still gave their votes to the BN candidate for the parliamentary seat (Datuk Seri Ong Tee Keat)," observed Md Aris.

Md Aris, the Pandan Umno wings and Ong's service centre are on one side of a campaign to visit every inch of Pandan to attend kenduri, give out aid to the needy and solve problems. Down the road, their PR rivals are doing exactly the same thing, often pairing with Selangor government agencies.

"(Chempaka assemblyman) YB Iskandar is always seen around here," says Sidek Mohamad of the Taman Inai apartments. "He pays attention to our needs and the neighbourhoods have improved under him."

Miles away in Taman Templer, Mohamad, who contested but did not win the seat in 2008, has been working the ground ever since he became Selangor service centre co-ordinator.

His biggest project so far has been to personally see to it that about 3,000 settlers of Bukit Botak get the houses they've been waiting for the 26 years.

"The centre has been working hard from the start on problems in Taman Templer. We believe we've done much and people can see that," says Mohamad.

Knowledge does not bring acceptance

Meet-and-greets, showing care and solving local problems are probably the less difficult part.

It's trickier when voters are obsessed with national problems such as inflation and governance. Iskandar, of Chempaka, says that urban voters tend to pay attention to these concerns.

Nizam Othman, for instance, says that for his generation, getting a decent-paying job is a constant worry.

"In my graduating class of engineering students, only 40 per cent of us found jobs in our fields. The rest are either salesmen, in marketing or are unemployed. It's frustrating. If you're going to be something other than an engineer, why spend four years studying it?"

Even as he is employed as an engineer in a local firm, Nizam says, the prospects aren't all that good.

"There are fewer projects out there because the economy isn't doing well and people are worried about getting retrenched. That's why youths like me are likely to vote PR, because we want to change to see if things can be better," says the 26-year-old from Pandan Indah.

But being exposed to new ideas and possibilities other than the BN, does not mean that urban voters are more broad-minded and critical.

Mohamad, of Taman Templer, still meets older voters who regard the PR as the "opposition" rather than a ruling government. Some mistakenly think that welfare aid from the state government is from the BN.

"It's the same with the youth, especially the working classes. They are weighed down by the escalating cost of things but feel that they should maintain the status quo because they want continued stability."

This is a major hurdle for the PR as it seeks to widen support among Malays. Though the concern is essentially about putting food on the table, PR leaders estimate that 50 per cent of all Malay voters, both urban and rural, see it through a racial lens.

It's almost absent among the English-speaking intelligentsia, but in Bahasa Malaysia-speaking circles, a Malay's survival is couched in terms of patronage and dependence to a political party.

Malay voters know that their problems are due to BN mismanagement, says Shah Alam MP Khalid Samad.

"The argument is though it's bad under Umno, the Malays can still stand. But if they reject Umno, they may be forced to crawl and beg," says Khalid, whose urban constituency is 68.8 per cent Malay.

Through interviews in the English press and ceramah, the PR has been able to rationally counter this perception. But many Malays still remain unconvinced largely because, says Khalid, the reality is PAS, as a Malay party, does not hold many seats and is not dominant in the PR.

So while Malay voters in Subang Jaya or Kota Damansara may have all the tools and information to make a rational comparison between the BN and the PR, they may in the end be swayed by the primordial instinct to place their future in the hands of people who look and speak like them.

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