

Selangor's rural voters turning inscrutable, weighing all options
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KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 7 — The fashionable view among the punditry declares that the battle for Putrajaya will be split between the countryside and the cities.

The subtext which is unfashionable to mention but necessarily implied is that it's the Malays who are the keeping the Barisan Nasional (BN) in power, because they make up the majority of "kampung folk". The non-Malays, on the other hand, will supposedly support Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

But the reality is much more complex, according to BN and PR grassroots workers, leaders and ordinary Selangor folk who The Malaysian Insider spoke to.

File photo of people at a Ramadan bazaar. Selangor's high level of development, its dense multi-ethnic population and the rivalry between state and federal administrations create trends and problems that shape political attitudes in startlingly complex ways. For instance, "Khairulzaman" is a 48-year-old accountant at a government-linked-company in Kuala Lumpur. He has a smart phone and is reasonably informed of the latest political scandals. He is frankly scornful of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and its de facto leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Then there is Adam Mohamad a 38-year-old padi farmer who lives in a part of Selangor where cellphone coverage is spotty. Adam and farmers like him depend on fertiliser and herbicide subsidies from the federal government. The feds also helped stabilise padi prices, thus increasing incomes. When asked if all this aid would guarantee support in an election, Adam said: "Not necessarily."

Both live in geographies that are as distinct as their worldviews and resist attempts to neatly put them in the clichéd classifications of a "rural" or "urban" voter.

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Migration and opportunity

Common assumption No. 1: A majority of rural voters are over 50 years old and above and are involved in some form of agriculture.

Reality: According to PAS, PKR and Umno officials The Malaysian Insider spoke to between 40 and 55 per cent of those living in areas such as Sabak Bernam, Kuala Selangor and Sepang are below 40.

Dr Badrulamin Baharon, who contested the Sabak Bernam parliamentary seat in 2008, estimates that about 60 per cent of those below 40 live and work outside the constituency.

"Older voters are few. But there is a significant number of people in their 20s and 30s," said Badrulamin, who is also Sabak Bernam PKR chief.

Salehan Mukhyi, a former Sungai Besar assemblyman, puts the number of outstation voters at 25 per cent or about 7,800 voters.

These are the women and men who leave their villages for the factories, corporations and businesses of the Klang Valley. They usually spend most of their time in the cities but make fortnightly trips back home to reconnect with parents and relatives.

As they mostly rent, they would still be registered to vote in their kampungs as they use their parents' addresses in their identity cards.

However, Salehan pointed out that the rest of a rural area's voters stay at home and find work in the countryside.

For many young men, high padi and oil palm prices have made staying and working the nearby plantations and fields a lot more attractive than migrating to the big cities.

"I am seeing more and more young ones in the padi industry," said Adam, the Sabak Bernam farmer. "They are in their 20s and 30s and either they work as day labourers or farmers who grow to sell."

A typical youth, Adam explained, can earn up to RM150 a day for four hours work by spraying poison or "tabor" fertiliser in the fields. "If you work in a factory you would only get RM50 after eight hours of work. Working in a field is hard but these days the pay is more."

Many of the fields, plantations and orchards in Selangor are family-owned and the high price of food has motivated male heirs to stay back and work their parents' holdings.

Coconuts are another booming crop, says businessman Sharif Ishak. The fruits are sold at RM1.20 per piece to middlemen who truck them to shops and restaurants in Petaling Jaya, Shah Alam and Kuala Lumpur.

"You don't need that much land. As long as you can harvest 5,000 fruits you could earn about RM5,000 a month," said Sharif, who owns a restaurant in Tanjung Karang.

Assumptions and reality

Assumption No. 2: Rural folk vote tend to be ignorant and vote BN.

Reality. Though Bersih 2.0 and rumours about a RM24 million ring get no traction among the villages, inflation is something that hurts deeply. And fingers are usually pointed at the federal government.

In the 2008 elections, BN assemblymen in Sabak Bernam, Hulu Selangor, Tanjong Karang and Kuala Selangor either lost or had their winning majorities slashed. Umno assemblymen who were used to winning by 2,000-over votes barely scraped by with a few hundred votes.

Salehan of Sungai Besar said though commodity prices have gone up, those reaping most of the profits are the middlemen who make a killing re-selling produce they buy in the Klang Valley.

"Sabak Bernam contributes much to Selangor's poverty figures. Cost of living has gone up

at a faster rate than commodity prices," said Salehan, Sabak Bernam's PAS chief.

Though commodity prices may be high, the land to work them on is limited, said Sungai Panjang assemblyman Datuk Seri Mohamad Khir Toyo. "Only some kids get the family farm. The rest still has to find other jobs."

Living under rival administrations has given Selangor voters the rare opportunity to sample different types of governance and what they offer the ordinary voter.

"Mereka berlumba-lumba nak ambik hati rakyat. (They are racing to win over the people)," said Tanjong Karang resident Ariffin Abdul Malik.

The Selangor government does not have the legal power to effect broad policies or the financial muscle to start development projects. So it has used whatever funds it has for complimentary initiatives such as the rice planting intensification scheme that has helped farmers like Adam.

It has also legalised the hordes of roadside food stall operators and made it easier for people to apply for licences, said Sharif. "This opens many opportunities for locals to make a living without having to leave town."

Real-life comparisons of how the two administrations work help inform a voter better than raking through the deluge of rhetoric and punditry on the web and the media. New critical ways of looking at governance still get spread far and wide as PR parties use their incumbency to hold more programmes and put up new branches in every corner of the state.

Relying on old tropes to get votes does not work anymore.

"It's more complicated now to campaign to young voters especially," said BN's Khir Toyo. "If you say, we've given you roads and amenities, they will say, that is the function of every government."

This new political awareness does not necessarily benefit PR either, as voters dislike the mud-slinging that pervades a typical ceramah. What matters at the end of the day is whether they can make life better.

"Now under two governments, everyone is getting aid," said Adam the farmer. "The Umno guy is getting aid, so is the PAS guy. Those in the middle get from both."

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