In Sabah, illegals issue central to coming polls
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By Clara Chooi

KOTA KINABALU, Feb 22 — Boatman Idris (not his real name) has lived all his life among the close-knit colony of illegal immigrants residing in dilapidated stilt homes girdling the eastern shore of Pulau Gaya, an island just minutes off Kota Kinabalu.

But unlike many of his neighbours, the 31-year-old was born Malaysian and does not have to sacrifice a large chunk of his monthly profits when Immigration Department officials come knocking.

The sight of the mad scramble among his friends and neighbours is not new to him, however, and he says it takes an average of RM200 to buy one's temporary freedom.

"MyKad? They don't need to show their MyKads. The ringgit is their MyKad," the good-natured Idris told The Malaysian Insider with a smile during a recent trip out on his boat to Pulau Gaya here.

Idris said at least 70 per cent of settlers in Kampung Lok Urai and Kampung Pondo on Pulau Gaya are foreigners, many of whom have overstayed their social visit passes but refuse to return home.

There are at least 400 wooden stilt homes linked by weathered planks in each of the few villages that the dot the Pulau Gaya beach, he added.

The illegals mostly work as fishermen, said Idris, and draw in meagre monthly salaries of about RM500 or so — "if they are lucky". But he said enough must be set aside "in case of an operation".

"For me, I ferry villagers to and from their homes and the city... I fish, I do some contract work and occasionally help my sister to ferry passengers in her van.

Dr Yee said the RCI on Sabah's illegal immigrants was essential. — Picture by Jack Ooi
"On a good month, I could draw in about RM1,000. But at the very least, about RM700," said the father of five children, four of whom are schoolgoing.

The unchecked influx of illegals in Sabah has been a longstanding problem in the Barisan Nasional-ruled (BN) state, and has usually been blamed for the rise in social, economic and security problems suffered by the locals here.

According to replies provided in Parliament last year, Sabah's populace numbered 651,304 in 1970 and grew to 929,299 a decade later. But in the two decades following 1980, the state's population rose significantly by a staggering 1.5 million people, reaching 2,468,246 by 2000.

Media reports said that as of 2010, this number has grown further to 3.12 million, with foreigners making up a sizeable 27 per cent or 889,799 of the population.

As the 13th general election draws closer, politicians across the divide have been quickly taking up the issue, turning it into a political hot potato that could become the deciding factor that determines Sabah's political future.

Opposition leaders have long raged against the BN government for this population explosion, alleging that illegals have been allowed into the east Malaysian state, and given MyKads and voting rights to help the ruling coalition cling to power.

"This is one of the worst things the government has done just to maintain their power base... they are actually destroying the state," Sabah State Reform Party (Star) chairman Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan told The Malaysian Insider in a recent interview.

Sabah-based opposition parties have also been using the issue to complement their "Sabah for Sabahans" warcry by blaming the BN government for the influx of foreigners.

For Sabah BN's local parties, resolving the matter is crucial for them to prove they are not subservient to their peninsula-based partner Umno — another point the opposition has also been working hard to drive home in the minds of Sabahans.

Earlier this month, Sabah BN appeared to score a win when Pasok Momogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (Upko) president Tan Sri Bernard Dompok announced that the federal Cabinet had finally agreed to the formation of a Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) to look into the state's illegals problem.

"This is something the people of Sabah want to see over the years. I brought up the RCI issue in the Cabinet at least three times previously, but it was (left) hanging without a decision.

"I brought this issue up again in the last Cabinet meeting (on February 8), and it was then that the Federal Cabinet made a decision... the prime minister will deal with the rest," he was quoted as saying on Bernama Online.

But the federal minister's announcement fell flat when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak failed to announce the RCI during his working visit to the state last week, as he was expected to.

In an apparent attempt at damage control, Dompok responded by saying the prime minister would only make the announcement at "an opportune time".

But media reports have already described Najib's silence as a "slap in the face" to BN's Sabah-based parties, raising again the opposition's often-used assertion of their subservience to the ruling Umno.

In a recent interview here with Sabah Deputy Chief Minister and PBS deputy president Datuk Dr Yee Moh Chai, however, this notion was rejected.

The veteran politician insisted that Sabah-based parties in BN have been pushing hard to have their way, particularly on the RCI issue. He claimed that the matter was finally close to being resolved, after years of pressure within BN itself.

"This is nothing new to the objectives of our party. In fact even in the past, our party manifesto spelled this out.

“We have now come to a stage where, we hope, we are more or less there. We have been consistent... we must have it (the RCI), you see,” he told The Malaysian Insider.

Dr Yee acknowledged that Umno depends largely on Sabah and Sarawak seats to keep its hold on federal power, but would not say if Sabah-based BN parties have been using this as their bargaining chip to get their way.

“How do you know we have not used it? This is what I am trying to tell you... how do I spell it out to you?

“How do we manage to get certain things done the way we want? But we do not have to show the world how we do it... we come from a big family and the fabric is fragile,” he said.

BN currently controls 22 of the 25 federal seats in Sabah and 57 of 60 state seats. DAP holds one state and one federal seat while SAPP, formerly of BN, holds two each.

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