

Indian Voter Support Also Significant In Next Polls

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KUALA LUMPUR, March 11 (Bernama) -- Support from Indian voters will again be key in the country's next general election (GE) as it was in the 2008 polls, say political analysts.

Malaysians of Indian origin now account for 1.9 million out of the country's 28 million population or 7.3 percent. But they feature significantly in 63 out of 67 parliamentary seats in Peninsula Malaysia.

A noticeable trend swept through the 2008 polls when almost 85 per cent of the Indian votes went to Pakatan Rakyat (PR), the opposition pact comprising PKR-DAP-PAS.

PR largely benefited from the shift in support from 72.4 per cent for Barisan Nasional (BN) in 2004 to just 8.3 per cent in 2008 as a result of issues played up by the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf).

But a discernable trend has emerged this time around: support from Indians for BN has improved, thanks to a number of pro-active actions spearheaded by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak on fundamental issues like Tamil schools, Hindu temples and education.

This also explains why Najib's approval rating along ethnic lines is the highest at 80 per cent among Indians, according to a recent survey by the Merdeka Centre.

Dr Sivamurugan Pandian, a political analyst at Universiti Sains Malaysia, says that results of various by-elections in Bukit Selambau, Bukit Gantang, Bagan Pinang and Hulu Selangor since 2008 clearly showed that Indian support for BN had improved.

He attributes this to Najib's readiness to engage on key concerns affecting the Indian community and that this support pattern would last through the next GE, especially with Indian-based NGOs playing an important role in monitoring the achievements of PR-controlled states.

The academic claims that PR had failed to meet the expectations of Indian NGOs or to work closely with Hindraf, an unregistered but vocal NGO, which had been dominant in the vote swing towards the Opposition in 2008.

After 2008, Hindraf split into five groups. One is with DAP, two others are the newly-formed Makkal Sakti Party and the unregistered Human Rights Party of Malaysia (HRPM) and the rest NGOs.

Of the five, the most influential is HRPM, and if it decides to take part in the upcoming GE, it may be able to split support between BN and PR.

Dr Sivamurugan says BN needs to capitalise on Najib's strong standing among Indians in that "one vote for BN also means a vote for Najib".

To do that, BN will have to look for suitable candidates who can convince voters on that equation, he adds.

MIC Youth chief T. Mohan, who also notes the positive winds of change, estimates that the MIC now has 60 to 65 percent support among Indians.

This has been largely due to various factors like changes in the party leadership, more funding for Tamil schools, and more places for Indian matriculation students, he says, adding that Najib's 1Malaysia outreach programme had clipped much of their resentment of the past.

Although some issues remained unresolved, Mohan believes that MIC could get close to what it got in 2004, with support expected to reach 70 to 75 per cent with suitable candidates and provided that "no one makes unnecessary remarks that could hurt the feelings of the community."

DAP vice-chairman and Member of Parliament for Ipoh Barat, M. Kulasegaran, however, dismissed BN's claim of growing support among Indians, saying that it was unsubstantiated.

"PR has invited MIC for a debate on Indian issues like the one between (DAP secretary-general) Lim Guan Eng and (MCA President) Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek.

Their (MIC) reluctance shows that they don't have support. They will be lucky if they win or retain the three parliamentary seats they have now," he said.

Kulasegaran asserted that many basic issues like high unemployment, deplorable conditions in Tamil schools, lack of study loans or scholarships and low Indian participation in the equity market had not been fully addressed.

"I believe the Indians still prefer PR for its openness and willingness to speak up for them and attend to their needs. PR was able to appoint an Indian as the first DCM (deputy chief minister) in Penang and a Speaker to the Perak state legislative assembly," he said.

But now, political analysts feel that there is perception among some Indian NGOs like Hindraf that PR is "focusing primarily" on Malay and Chinese voters" or handling Indian issues on a piecemeal basis and hence the fear that their "representation" through PR could be lost.

This explains why some are saying that support among the Indians is split down the middle, with both BN and PR saying that they have their support.

PR could be the biggest loser this time around if it fails to garner Indian support as it got the lion's share then.

If 30 per cent of registered Indian voters decide not to vote, it also means that both sides have to compete for the remaining 70 per cent, which is largely split into three unique "segments" -- the lower, middle and upper classes.

Hindraf still has some influence left. If it stays away from the GE, it could cause PR to lose its grip on Selangor and Kedah.

Getting Hindraf on board could mean that PR has to accept demands from HRPM, Hindraf's

unregistered political wing, of five to seven parliamentary seats.

Datuk Dr Denison Jayasooria, Principal Research Fellow, Institute of Ethnic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, believes that Hindraf does not have mass appeal anymore because of in-fighting.

He also thinks that the lower classes seem to be largely with BN while the middle and upper classes are with the opposition.

Saying that MIC's chances would be better than 2008 but not 2004, this can only happen if it fields open-minded candidates who appeal to other communities as well since the resolution of the MAIKA share issue and MIC leadership change had made it difficult for PR to exploit.

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