

PKR's Rafizi to face Tee Keat in Pandan for GE13
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By Clara Chooi

PANDAN, June 13 — PKR's Rafizi Ramli, well known as the man behind the National Feedlot Centre (NFC) scandal exposé, will likely make his election debut in Pandan at the coming polls — a contest he says will be a "national referendum" on Barisan Nasional (BN) and the MCA.

The PKR strategy director, whose career in politics only began in 1998 after Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's sacking, will be going up against political giant Datuk Seri Ong Tee Keat for the federal seat.

Ong, a former Cabinet minister, MCA's eighth president and a popular leader in Pandan, has been the constituency's MP for two terms now.

Before the Pandan parliamentary seat was created in 2004, Ong had been the MP for Ampang Jaya since 1989.

Rafizi's name was unexpectedly mentioned during a rally at Taman Seraya last night by PKR leader Datuk Dr Tan Kee Kwong, and the 35-year-old chartered accountant, caught slightly off-guard, was later mobbed by voters clamouring to shake his hand and snap pictures with him.

The Petronas scholar, who was wearing a party vest with his name and the Pandan constituency's "P100" ballot number embroidered on it, would not confirm his candidacy to reporters later but admitted that he has been spending his last seven months on the hustings for PKR in the area.

Rafizi said, however, that should he be selected as PKR's candidate for Pandan, he would stand a fighting chance against the popular Ong, whom he said "should be quite scared, actually".

"He (Ong) has strong support (in Pandan), we have to give him credit where it is due, but I do not think he can survive the next tsunami," he said.

Ong, who has grown increasingly ostracised in MCA since his successor, Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek, ousted him during the party's 2010 polls, is viewed as one of the party's few remaining leaders who stand a strong chance of winning in the coming general election.

The former transport minister is well liked among Pandan constituents and was one of the few MCA politicians who survived Election 2008. BN's candidates had lost in both the Teratai and Cempaka state seats under Pandan, but Ong had surprisingly cruised to a comfortable 2,961-vote majority win.

According to Rafizi, it was likely a simple case of "familiarity" that had helped Ong retain the seat in 2008, adding that the over 60,000 voters in the constituency had mostly voted along racial lines.

He pointed out that PKR had won the Malay votes while a large segment of the Chinese community in Pandan had voted for Ong and DAP's Teratai assemblyman, Jenice Lee.

"If you look at the state seats versus the parliamentary seats, Pakatan Rakyat (PR) got a nearly 10,000-vote majority in the (two) state seats but we lost by over 2,000 votes in the parliamentary seat.

"So it remains to be seen whether it was purely because of Ong or ... racial lines.

"After about seven months working around and walking in Pandan, I think it is not about Ong. It is on racial lines and it is not so much race or racism, it is because of familiarity," he explained.

Rafizi reminded that in 2008, PR was yet to be formed and PAS, PKR and DAP had campaigned separately at the time, instead of as a team.

By ensuring the election machineries of the three parties work together this time, he said, PKR would stand a better chance unseat Ong in Pandan.

The winning formula for PR, said Rafizi, was to canvas for votes by pitching the "bigger picture" to voters of Pandan: A change in federal government.

"Ong has retreated into local issues — streets, rubbish and so on — for the last two years. But it would be a mistake for PR to follow his style.

"Of course he (Ong) would speak on his track record. But this is not about Ong Tee Keat. This is about a bigger picture... it's a national referendum on BN and the MCA. And this is our selling point," he said.

Rafizi admitted, however, he would still be entering the battle as the underdog, pointing out that after his 22 years in the constituency, Ong's face and name remains popular among constituents, especially the Chinese community.

The urban and semi-urban Pandan seat is a mixed seat, comprising some 55 per cent of non-Malay voters and with voters aged below 40 making up more than half the electorate.

"That is why, in terms of demographics, Pandan is right for Pakatan. It is a mixed seat and it is urban. (The) education background (of constituents) is quite good.... I think it would be a close fight," he said.

The Terengganu-born Rafizi has also been touted as a likely candidate for Kemaman, but following PR's urgent need to retain power in Selangor come the next polls, it is highly likely that the young leader will be placed in Pandan to face Ong.

When asked, however, on what he would do should Ong decide at the eleventh hour to quit MCA and join PKR's ranks, Rafizi said he would willingly step aside for the latter to recontest in Pandan if his party desires.

"We will welcome it and if he is the best candidate to win Pandan, I will be campaigning like hell for him... because it is not about candidates or anything, it's about going to Putrajaya.

"So if he quits tomorrow, he comes to PKR, he is accepted and the party decides that he is a candidate, jolly good... I can go and make more movies!" he joked, referring to his coming production of a comedy on the NFC scandal.

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