

Tamil Nesan starts English pullout, helps MIC woo voters
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KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 3 — The Tamil Nesan daily is starting an English pullout on September 15 as its MIC-linked owners want to widen readership among non-Tamil-reading Indians ahead of the general election which must be called by next April.

There are four Tamil newspapers that cater to the 1.7 million Malaysian Indians in the country, with the oldest being Tamil Nesan which is owned by S. Vell Paari, the son of former MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu.

“Our target audience has always been Tamil readers, but we want to increase it to the sub-ethnic groups; the Malayalees, Punjabis and Telegus, for example,” Vell Paari told The Malaysian Insider in an interview, saying that the local English and Bahasa Malaysia newspapers do not cater to the Indians, a key vote in a number of federal and state constituencies.

“Take, for instance, the government’s recent announcement of giving the Indian community RM180 million. None of the dailies further explained how or where the Indian community could get it from. Tamil Nesan wants to use our reach to inform the community specifically on these details,” he said.

The pullout, which will be a tabloid insert, would be published on a weekly basis with an average of 12 pages but could eventually be printed daily, said the newspaper owner.

Vell Paari, who is also MIC information chief, said the daily had received an approval letter signed on behalf of the secretary general to the Ministry of Home Affairs dated June 20.

Tamil Nesan’s English pullout comes exactly two months after a new Tamil daily, Nam Naadu, hit the streets to compete with Tamil Nesan, Malaysia Nanban and Makkal Osai. The new daily is backed by prominent businessman and Malaysian Association of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MAICCI) president Datuk Kenneth Eswaran who also runs the fledgling pay-TV venture Asian Broadcasting Network (ABN).

Despite the number of Tamil newspapers licensed by the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) government, a majority of Malaysia’s ethnic Indians rejected BN in Election 2008 and threw out a number of MIC candidates including Samy Vellu from his Sungai Siput fortress. Analysts have attributed BN’s poor support from the Indian community to the snub to the Hindraf movement and falling circulation of the Tamil dailies.

Vell Paari said the 88-year-old Tamil Nesan has an average daily circulation of 44,000 copies while the Sunday edition has an average of 85,000, admitting that circulation has fallen over the years.

“Our highest so far for the daily has been 81,000 copies while the Sunday edition once registered a circulation of 178,000,” he said, expressing hope that the English pullout would increase circulation by catering to a new audience.

"Some Indians nowadays don't read and write Tamil because they went to government schools, others just prefer to read English. We plan to cater to these readers as well," he added.

Tamil Nesan's push for greater Indian readership comes at a time when the Najib administration has loosened rules for the media by doing away with annual permits and pushing for a media council for self-regulation. However, a majority of the newspapers and television stations are owned by pro-government businessmen while party organs have limited frequency and sales restricted to members only.

Current MIC president Datuk Seri G. Palanivel said last January that government statistics revealed the number of registered Indian voters in the peninsula stood at 850,000, whom the Najib administration has been wooing with a slew of initiatives including the RM180 million fund for Indian entrepreneurs.

Other initiatives since the electoral debacle in Election 2008 including a make-over of Kuala Lumpur's Little India in Brickfields, giving a national public holiday for the Thaipusam festival and a day off for Sikh civil servants celebrating Vaisakhi.

The MIC has also resubmitted a list of candidates, including several new faces, to ensure it will do better in the next general election over Pakatan Rakyat (PR) which has a higher number of Indian lawmakers in both federal and state legislatures.

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