

**'Najib factor' crucial to MIC's fight for Indian vote**  
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**By Clara Chooi**

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 6 — In the MIC's tussle for the Indian vote, one important element has been identified as key to help Barisan Nasional (BN) recapture lost support from the key community — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

Despite criticisms that it has grown overly dependent on Najib and BN for survival, the party has recognised the importance of the prime minister's popularity to drive the Indian vote when national polls are held.

The Indian vote is seen as crucial to determine BN's future in the country as the next general election is expected to be very closely fought battle between the ruling coalition and the fledgling Pakatan Rakyat (PR) pact.

Observers have claimed that Najib and BN leaders have lost confidence in the MIC's ability to score the Indian vote, resulting in efforts by the prime minister to engage directly with the community, who form nearly 1.8 million out of the 28 million population in Malaysia. Some 800,000 are registered voters.

Just last month, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz announced in Parliament that Najib was ready to hold a dialogue with the outlawed Hindraf movement to discuss the community's key concerns.

Murugesan said Najib's openness and ability to listen has helped portray a different view of BN to Indian voters.

But in an interview with The Malaysian Insider here yesterday, MIC secretary-general Datuk S. Murugesan noted there was nothing wrong with relying on the "Najib factor" to boost Indian support, adding that humility has been important in wooing support back into BN's fold

"We have a good PM (prime minister)... what's wrong with that?" he said.

"It is only to be expected. All this while, people have been saying — why hasn't the government done this or done that... and the face of the government is the PM.

"So if they think we have a good leader with good heart, good ears and a sound mind at the helm, they will support us.

"So... yes, Najib is an important factor and I've got no issues with that," he added.

As such, Murugesan said the MIC does not feel slighted that Najib has been going directly to the ground to campaign and engage with local Indian community leaders, pointing out that this was the work of a prime minister.

He said Najib's openness and ability to listen has helped portray a different view of BN to Indian voters, who are said to form some seven per cent of the electorate.

This has cajoled much of the Indian community back to supporting BN and calmed much of the frustrations raised just before the March 2008 general election, he said.

Murugesan added that it was most unlikely that these past simmering frustrations would come to a head again in the 13th general election as the BN government under Najib's leadership has done well to resolve them.

"The main reason is because the PM has made it clear and the MIC made it clear that we hear the Indian community. The PM has openly stated it," he pointed out.

"I think during our last or previous general assembly, the PM even admitted to some of our past mistakes and neglect."

Murugesan added that in the four years after the last election, BN and the MIC have managed to prove that the needs of the Indian community would not be neglected through special budget allocations for Tamil schools and Indian entrepreneurs, more sustained programmes for the Indian community and cash handouts for the country's poor under the Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia (BR1M) initiative.

These programmes, when added to the BN government's more "inclusive" and "progressive" moves, have widened the pact's appeal to all segments of the Indian community, he said.

"Of course there are some sceptics and that's why it the return of support is slow... but when I say it is slow, I must also stress that it is steady," he said.

The Indian community has long been seen as a "fixed deposit" vote bank for BN but the march organised by the now outlawed Hindraf movement was believed to be what blew the lid on the group's simmering frustration over being left out of development for decades.

That tumultuous event, together with Bersih's first march for free and fair elections in late 2007, has been credited for the staggering losses suffered by the ruling coalition in the March 8, 2008, general election.

The MIC will hold its 66th national assembly, its final before national polls, at the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) this weekend.

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