

Najib keeps faith with SibU
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FULFILLED: The prime minister's frequent visits show his keen interest to listen to the people

A PLACARD with a message asking for a university in SibU caught Datuk Seri Najib Razak's attention as he was walking out of the Boon Hin Cafe after a breakfast of locally brewed Sungai Merah coffee and pulut with kaya, both local specialities.

He stopped to read the words, "My beloved prime minister. We dream of having a university in SibU", on the placard held by SJK Tiong Hua pupil Angela Kong. He also accepted flowers from Angela's younger siblings Adriana and Adeline.

That was two years ago.

The girls and hundreds of local residents had waited patiently at Sungai Merah bazaar for Najib to emerge from the coffeee shop where he and Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud were having an impromptu meal with locals during one of his walkabouts ahead of the SibU by-election.

Last Sunday, not far from Sungai Merah, Najib performed the ground-breaking of University College of Technology Sarawak (UCTS), a joint venture between the state government and Universiti Kuala Lumpur.

The crowd had swelled within a few hours prior to the ceremony held at the site of the proposed university adjacent to the old SibU airport runway, opposite Kolej Laila Taib. The college is set to be a feeder to UCTS as its diploma graduates can pursue their degrees there.

UCTS was planned as part of efforts to meet the high demand for skilled workers under the Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (Score). The courses to be offered by the university would equip Sarawak's youths with better skills, training and education.

A survey found that 52 per cent of the jobs created under Score from now until 2030 would require at least semi-skilled workers. By 2030, at least 100,000 more engineers and 500,000 skilled workers would be required in Sarawak.

The idea of building the university was made during the SibU by-election in May 2010 when Najib visited Kolej Laila Taib, where he agreed to the college being upgraded to a university.

However, Higher Education Minister Datuk Khaled Nordin advised that a separate licence be applied to set up a university instead since Kolej Laila Taib was already doing well.

A letter of offer to set up the university was subsequently issued last May. If everything goes as scheduled, SibU will have its own university in a year's time.

As always, the opposition poured cold water on the government's initiatives to improve the livelihood of the people of SibU and Sarawak in general.

Sibu MP Wong Ho Leng of the DAP doubts the project will materialise. He thinks it is an election gimmick.

Having a university in Sibu is an old issue that remains alive as politicians try to win over the mostly Chinese constituents. This despite common knowledge that most families with means would still prefer to send their children to study overseas.

"No doubt, education is one of the main concerns of the Chinese community. But to say that having a university will have an impact that will change the community's views of Barisan Nasional is misleading," says Kuching-based political analyst Dr Jeniri Amir.

Jeniri says where the majority of Sibu votes will go in the approaching national polls largely depends on national issues. The same issues will be replayed by the DAP.

If the results of last year's state elections are taken into account, it is more likely that the Chinese voters in Sibu will go against BN. The ruling coalition, however, could tap into native votes for a winning chance.

The overall Chinese vote for BN had declined to about 20 per cent in last year's state elections. The non-Muslim Bumiputera vote was also down by 7.2 per cent but the Malay/Melanau vote showed an increase of 1.3 per cent. There was an overall decline of 7.4 per cent in the popular vote for BN.

But BN lost Sibu to DAP by a mere 398 votes in the by-election following the death of BN incumbent Datuk Robert Lau Hoi Chew.

Going by the votes garnered by BN in the three state seats in the constituency at the state election, BN should have won Sibu.

In the state election, BN won Bawang Assan by 1,808 votes and Nangka by 5,302 votes, but lost Pelawan by 6,391 votes -- a net 719 votes more than the opposition.

Jeniri thinks the vote this time could go either way.

Other observers believe the BN still has a chance to recapture Sibu despite strong headwinds provided the right candidate from the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) is fielded.

But SUPP is still preoccupied with its own survival and the power struggle that appears on the surface to have fizzled.

BN is almost certain to field community leader Vincent Lau although his candidacy is problematic as party president Datuk Seri Peter Chin has another candidate in mind.

The party has been told that Taib will not allow the rival factions to defeat each other, especially in Sibu which the BN had categorised as "grey", and he would personally see that the line is towed.

Boatman Loh Si Teng and his colleagues, after a little coaxing, admitted they had heard complaints of too much politicking since the DAP took control of Sibu.

They however agreed that Ho Leng was a likeable leader for the Sibu Chinese, mainly of the Foochow clan. Ho is also Bukit Assek assemblyman in nearby Lanang constituency.

But Loh related an interesting story about his three passengers from the Baseh longhouse; the Iban men said things had not changed for them after voting for the DAP

and because of that, they were thinking of reverting to BN again. The longhouse is one of the few that opposition leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim visited during campaigning for the SibU by-election.

As DAP and SUPP are locked in a rigorous tussle for votes, the bookies are back.

Unlike in May 2010, the bet is on BN's return in SibU.

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