

Penang BN election strategy: Food for votes?
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By Opalyn Mok

GEORGE TOWN, April 11 — Food — whether served at small intimate gatherings, hawkers' feasts, high-tea sessions, buffet dinners or grand eight-course banquets — has become the currency with which Barisan Nasional (BN) here hopes to win votes.

Especially in the Bukit Bendera constituency.

These events, usually attracting hundreds of people from all walks of life, are often hosted and organised by local non-governmental organisations, residents' associations and some by the Penang BN co-ordinators.

Describing these events as a way to get down to the ground to reach out to voters, Bukit Bendera BN parliamentary co-ordinator H'ng Chee Wey said residents prefer attending such events compared to ceramahs.

"We've been doing this, organising small gatherings and events for different residential areas, in the past few months to cultivate a closer relationship between the residents and to listen to their grouses," he said.

H'ng was the guest of honour at just such a dinner — a sit-down eight-course banquet similar to those served at weddings or milestone birthdays — held in the middle of a cordoned-off road in a quiet hilly residential area off Mount Erskine last Sunday night.

The "neighbourhood night" event, themed "Respect and Love", saw about 470 residents in the area turning up.

At the start of the event, the residents' association and organising chairman Khoo Teck Hock said the evening was organised to get all the residents together to cultivate better understanding.

When it was H'ng's turn to speak, he told the people there was no ulterior motive behind the organisation of the event. "Please do not misunderstand that we only hold street parties just because the election is near," he said.

This was the third big sit-down dinner that H'ng admitted was organised and funded using his co-ordinator allocation.

He receives an annual co-ordinator fund of RM80,000 to organise social and welfare programmes in his constituency while BN state co-ordinators receive a RM50,000 allocation each year.

"Other times, I organise smaller gatherings and events and these are usually to listen to residents complain about clogged drains, defective lamp posts or poorly maintained playgrounds," he told reporters at the event.

Bukit Bendera, which consists of four state constituencies, namely Kebun Bunga, Pulau Tikus, Tanjung Bungah and Air Puteh, is an ethnic-Chinese majority area with 74 per cent Chinese, 14 per cent Malays and 11 per cent Indians.

It used to be a BN stronghold where Gerakan's Datuk Seri Chia Kwang Chye had held the parliamentary seat for three terms before losing to the DAP's Liew Chin Tong in Election 2008 when the latter won by a massive 16,112-vote majority.

Former Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon had also held the Tanjung Bungah state seat from 1990 until 2008 when he left it to contest the Batu Kawan parliamentary seat and lost.

Other BN co-ordinators under the Bukit Bendera constituency have also been organising similar dinner events to reach out to the people.

Pulau Tikus co-ordinator Rowena Yam said most of these events are organised by non-governmental organisations, residents' associations and other associations.

"Not all are organised by us, we are just invited to attend as VIPs," she said.

It is learnt that in the past few months, several times a week, small dinner events are held at residential areas all over the state

When asked about these, H'ng said there are more being organised in Pulau Tikus but he is not sure if Yam had organised them.

"I know there have been many functions held in recent weeks, but I am not sure who organised or funded these functions," he said.

Yam also did not want to reveal who had organised these events and brushed them off as private events held by NGOs even though these functions were open to the public and were rumoured to be held in support of the Penang BN.

"All I know is that my own KPI is to hold at least an event each week, whether it is to organise a dinner or hold a small high-tea gathering so that we can reach out to the people and tell them about BN's transformation programmes and assist them with BR1M," the lawyer said.

On Monday night, a lavish sit-down eight-course dinner was held at the Han Chiang school field.

The event, co-organised by BN-friendly NGO 1Malaysia-Penang Welfare Club and Zhou Jia Quan Martial Arts Association, saw more than 5,000 people attending it.

The martial arts association chairman, Loh Chye Teik, who is also the Komtar BN co-ordinator, said it was purely a charitable event for his association and for the welfare club.

"It was a kungfu night for my association and the welfare club partially funded this night as they wanted to co-organise this event with us to hold their charitable cheque presentation ceremony," he said.

The welfare club donated RM2.2 million to 106 NGOs including RM50,000 each to three media associations — Penang Press Club, Penang Journalists and Photographers Association (Pewaju) and Journalist Union of North Malaya.

Loh denied that the welfare club has any links to BN except that it is BN-friendly and

supportive of BN.

He also denied that the dinner was a politically-motivated event. Among the VIPs present at the event was local billionaire Low Teck Jho, who is rumoured to be the person who funded these lavish dinners.

Low has denied his involvement in any of the dinners and also refused to comment about whether he is the person behind an upcoming 1 Malaysia concert in Penang on April 20.

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