

In Sungai Siput, a fight for MIC's future
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KUALA LUMPUR, May 1 — MIC is going all-out to win back the Sungai Siput seat previously held by Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu for three decades, for both a symbolic and political victory.

The former MIC president's 30-year reign in Sungai Siput inextricably linked the federal seat to the party he once led, and his shock defeat there in 2008 made it appear as though it had lost home ground, The Straits Times reported today.

But in Election 2013, MIC is back with a vengeance, according to the Singapore newspaper.

It is fielding caretaker deputy minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk SK Devamany and has spent more than RM3 million in the past three months alone on road repairs and other work in this constituency.

For MIC, Sungai Siput is not simply another seat. Aside from its long past with Samy Vellu, it also has a sizeable Indian community — 21 per cent of the 51,709 voters or around double the proportion of Indians in Malaysia — making it a quasi-referendum on the party's political relevance.

MIC won only three parliamentary seats in 2008, but is contesting nine seats in Election 2013.

To start its fightback, MIC will need to dislodge PSM's Dr Michael Jeyakumar, the soft-spoken political activist who took down Samy Vellu in 2008.

An independent, S. Nagalingam, has also thrown his hat in the ring.

This time, MIC may be aided by a less-focussed Indian community. Unlike in 2008 when the group found cohesion courtesy of HINDRAF, there is no such guiding force today.

Having attacked the government for oppressing Indians, HINDRAF signed a pact with Barisan Nasional (BN) last month, leading to a fracture in its own ranks.

But BN's fielding of Perkasa vice-president Zulkifly Noordin, alleged to have disparaged both Hindus and Indians, has also outraged the community.

Such conflicts are not lost on the voters.

"The MIC helps its own people, not the poor people," Suresh Mohan, a 47-year-old contractor, told The Straits Times. "HINDRAF? It was good for us at first but now, I'm not sure."

The choice of outsider Devamany over Samy Vellu may also complicate things for MIC, despite the latter actively campaigning for the former.

"We don't know much about Devamany. But Samy backs him, so we just have to trust his word," shopkeeper Rajasagar Muthiah, 60, was quoted as saying.

Despite such matters, some voters may be convinced by the sudden and abundant attention

paid to the area. Residents reminisce of how potholes on the impressive four-lane main road were swiftly filled under Samy Vellu, something that incumbent Dr Jeyakumar can ill-afford to do.

But they are quick to praise him for helping with problems related to land, housing and poverty.

"MIC hasn't been around. And suddenly they come with a lot of money and they have been giving out money," Dr Jeyakumar told The Straits Times, expressing fear that this may sway votes in his opponents favour.

Devamany is also promising to revitalise Sungai Siput, pledging among others a pharmaceutical park and an agriculture-based tourism industry.

"Imagine, in a garden you have not watered for many years, and you suddenly see rain falling. The flowers will blossom and the trees take shape," he said.

And, as he and MIC hope, a chance for the party to regain its roots.

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