

In GE13, Indian votes remain up for grabs, say analysts
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KUALA LUMPUR, April 23 — Malaysia's significant Indian community remains a key demographic in Election 2013, with analysts saying Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Rakyat (PR) are in a tight race to get the better part of their nearly one million votes.

More Indians are likely to vote for BN this time compared to 2008, analysts said, with 52 per cent of Indians surveyed in favour of the ruling BN in a private poll taken by the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research before Parliament was dissolved last month.

"BN shouldn't take the Indian vote for granted though," Merdeka Center executive director Ibrahim Suffian told The Malaysian Insider, adding the survey was done before BN named controversial Malay rights campaigner Datuk Zulkifli Noordin as its election candidate.

The Malay rights group Perkasa vice-president had courted protest over remarks made in a video clip that were seen as insulting to the Hindu religion. He has apologised for the remarks, blaming it on his former colleagues in Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

BN chairman Datuk Seri Najib Razak defended Zulkifli's candidacy for the Shah Alam federal seat, saying yesterday the lawyer had championed Indian issues such as the construction of a Tamil school and a Hindu temple in the mainly middle-class Selangor state capital.

Zulkifli's candidacy has outraged a number of groups, including Najib's Umno ally MIC, the Indian party in BN but he remains on the ruling party's slate for the May 5 general election.

"The opposition Indian parties are weak, and exploitation of Zulkifli's candidacy has been poor unlike that done by the civil service organisations," said Ibrahim.

The pollster also noted that BN has worked on various initiatives to get the Indian vote that deserted the coalition in the 2008 general election after a rare protest about their social and economic plight was violently put down.

Several leaders of the protest organisers Hindraf were detained without trial in the aftermath of the 2007 protest. But all have been released and a few are now with BN in Election 2013, including Hindraf leader P. Waythamoorthy who signed a pact with Najib several days ago to improve the community's conditions.

"BN has been working harder for the Indian vote, unlike Pakatan which has been battling the past few years to get the Malay ground," said Ibrahim, explaining BN's slight edge in the survey.

Bersih co-chairman Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan, who has toured the country and met a fair number of the community, also said the Indian vote is not guaranteed for either side in Election 2013.

"I don't think any side should take the Indian vote for granted," she told The Malaysian Insider when commenting on the Merdeka Center poll results.

"I don't think the Indians are a fixed deposit. I know Bersih gets a lot of support from the Indians because they are more empowered," she added, referring to the movement for

clean and fair elections by its acronym.

The former Bar Council president also noted the survey was done before Zulkifli was named as a BN candidate and the pact between Hindraf and the ruling coalition.

"Zulkifli is a non-starter with the Indians. By fielding Zulkifli, many Indians feel it shows utter contempt for them as the Indians are the people that get belittled," Ambiga said.

She also said the conversations she has had with a number of Indians revealed their anger over the pact made by Hindraf's Waythamoorthy with BN, especially its timing before the polls.

"They are angry with the memorandum of understanding. It went down like a lead balloon," she said, adding the Indian community felt betrayed by the pact which deviated from what Hindraf set out to do in 2007.

Both coalitions are fielding a number of Indian candidates in Election 2013 in the nearly 60 of the 222 federal seats where the community is a significant minority. Buntong in Perak is the largest Indian-majority state seat, where they make up 48 per cent of the 22,907-strong electorate, followed by the Chinese at 44 per cent and Malays at six per cent.

Indians make up just about 950,000 of the 13.3 million voters eligible to cast their ballots in the May 5 general election.

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