

In Kluang, MCA admits trailing in Chinese votes, DAP targets bigger Malay support

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KLUANG, April 25 – The MCA is “far behind” in Chinese votes in the battle for the Kluang federal seat, the party’s candidate Datuk Dr Hou Kok Chung has admitted as he defends the party stronghold from DAP heavyweight Liew Chin Tong.

Hou told The Malaysian Insider that he faced a tough challenge in getting support from the Chinese community, saying bluntly: “Chinese votes, we are far behind.”

He agreed that the loss of Chinese votes had contributed to his smaller win with a 3,781 vote-majority as an MCA candidate against DAP’s Ng Lam Hua in 2008. In 2004, MCA’s Hoo Seong Chang had defeated Ng with a whopping majority of 18,698 votes.

“Dr Hou is a good MP, the Chinese always say that, but unfortunately, he is in the wrong party,” said the MCA central committee member, referring to the perception which he has to overcome.

“We’ll see how strong is this anti-establishment wind so we have to work very hard on that,” he added.

The Barisan Nasional (BN) man cited the local Chinese community’s concern of national issues over local matters, saying that his opponent DAP had campaigned aggressively on such issues through public speeches.

The Johor-born politician prefers the “softer” approach of meeting the people, who he said are familiar with him and his service.

The MCA man will be banking on his track record in serving the people here in his campaign, saying that he has been appearing in his constituency for at least three days each week during his term as a Kluang MP.

“I’m local, basically the Kluang people know me quite well. I have my own record. I just use my last five years’ performance either in ministry or service record. Now of course, we leave it to voters,” the deputy higher education minister said.

In Kluang, banners stating BN’s achievements are put up all over town, with messages such as “In 2011 and 2013, Malaysia recognised degrees conferred by universities in China and Taiwan”, which is also listed in pamphlets on his performance as a deputy minister.

Other banners along the streets of Kluang in the Chinese and English language trumpet Putrajaya’s channelling of RM415 million to government-aided Chinese primary schools from 2009 to 2013 and the churning out of 200,000 graduates from MCA-linked institutions of higher learning, KTAR and UTAR.

Education is close to the hearts of the Chinese community, who make up 49 per cent of the 86,914 registered voters in Kluang. Malay voters contribute substantially to a win in the railway town at 39 per cent, while Indian voters stand at 10 per cent.

DAP’s Liew acknowledged that his party traditionally receives less Malay support compared

to its ally PAS, while the Islamist PAS also gets fewer non-Malay votes.

"Of course target is not 80 per cent Malay votes... I say we are very close to initial target of 35 per cent votes," the party strategist told The Malaysian Insider in a recent interview when speaking about the response from the Malay community here.

Liew explained that Pakatan Rakyat (PR) had chosen to create a "crossing" in support among the different ethnic groups by getting more Malays to support DAP and more non-Malays to support PAS.

"We believe by campaigning as Pakatan, the chances of us winning together are quite high," Liew said, referring to the opposition pact's joint ceramahs and press conferences where he regularly appears with Khairul Faizi and Tan Hong Pin, the PAS candidate for the Mahkota state seat and the DAP's Mengkibol state seat candidate.

Liew, a Selangor man who previously served in the Bukit Bendera federal seat in Penang, disagreed that voters are particularly concerned over whether he is a local, saying that voters would welcome "national names".

He also said the contest in Kluang is not between two personalities, but between two options as a government, pointing to DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng's announcement of his candidacy in Johor – the BN stronghold and Umno's birthplace.

Mila, a 42-year-old Kampung Melayu resident, who works in the town with many buildings still sporting facades from its days as an important railway stop, was willing to give PR a chance.

"We feel (we) want a change," she said in sharing her concerns over the rising cost of living, while saying many young Malays shared her sentiment.

But just a few minutes' drive away, a drinks vendor in the Malay heartland of Kampung Melayu indicated that BN still has a strong grip on the Malay vote.

"Here from last time until now, BN. Lain susah masuk (others hard to enter)," said the woman in her 30s, only giving her name as Zie.

"If DAP and MCA, maybe I choose MCA," she said, saying that BN had taken care of the economy, while also admitting that she was fearful of unrest if PR won.

A warung (coffeeshop) owner in her 50s and staying in Taman Kluang Barat was adamant in her choice of BN, saying that she was already old and peace was her topmost priority.

"All this while, BN rule, there's no problem. We need peace," the lady who declined to give her name said, while saying that the people should not count on the government for everything and should strive on their own.

In Election 2008, BN won 25 out of the 26 federal seats in Johor, while DAP won the opposition's solitary seat. BN had a virtually clean sweep of the 56 state seats with a 50-seat win, while DAP and PAS respectively snapped up four and two in the southern state.

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