

PAS banks on Chinese-Christian candidate in Ayer Hitam
Malaysian Insider
April 25, 2013

AYER HITAM, April 25 — PAS candidate Hu Pang Chaw makes heads turn when he goes out on the campaign trail — his entourage includes women in traditional Malay dress and headscarves.

Ethnic Chinese and Christian, Hu is one of the first non-Muslim candidates to be fielded by PAS, the Singapore Straits Times reported today.

It said that whether he wins or loses, it will be a test of the opposition party's efforts to expand beyond its core constituency of pious Muslims, and of its national ambitions.

The daily said Hu, 58, who is clean-shaven with short grey hair, could easily pass for a church pastor and he certainly stood out among the goatees and turbans of many PAS leaders.

Hu, chief of PAS's non-Muslim wing, the PAS Supporters Congress, is up against MCA Youth chief Datuk Dr Wee Ka Siong, the incumbent, for the parliamentary seat in Ayer Hitam, Johor.

The Straits Times report said the unprecedented move by PAS to field a non-Muslim candidate in one of its key battlegrounds in Johor, especially when Malays make up 57 per cent of the 43,000 voters in Ayer Hitam, has drawn some flak.

But Hu, a Presbyterian, told the daily he has no qualms speaking about Islam at his ceramahs.

"Our members come from different races and religions, but we have common values and a common goal," he tells his audience. "Allah tells you to do good things, be respectful and help one another. There is no conflict between the different religions," he was quoted as saying.

PAS vice-president Salahuddin Ayub told The Straits Times, that Hu's candidacy is "to show how open we are. PAS for all. And we really practise it this time round".

In 2008, PAS fielded an Indian candidate, R. Kumutha Raman, in a state seat in Johor, but under the banner of an ally — PKR — because the PAS constitution did not then allow for non-Muslim candidates.

That has since changed and Kumutha is again being fielded in the Tiram seat, which she lost in 2008, on a PAS ticket.

Hu is a first-time candidate but he is not new to politics. In 1999, he campaigned for Datuk Anuar Tan, a Chinese Muslim, who won the Kota Lama state seat in Kelantan from the MCA.

He was appointed a municipal councillor from 2000 to 2004 and served as political secretary to Tan. As part of his job, Hu travelled around Malaysia inviting non-Muslim groups to visit Kelantan to see it for themselves.

"We wanted to clear all their doubts that people have on Kelantan, like how there is no bak kut teh here," Hu was quoted as saying.

"I show them that I eat bak kut teh every day... Non-Muslims are happy living here," said Hu, who has lived in Kota Baru for 36 years.

According to the report, he brushed off his rival's warning to Chinese voters that a PAS win would mean the implementation of hudud law, which prescribes punishments such as cutting off the hands of thieves.

"People are concerned with bigger issues like corruption in the government, education and policies," Hu said.

His opponent Wee is a two-term MP and also deputy education minister.

According to the report, Wee is taking his challenger seriously, conceding that he may be the opposition's "giant killer".

He plans to visit every village, no matter how small. "Every vote counts," he was quoted as saying.

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