

Is Anwar slowly winning over Umno supporters in Kajang?

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Although official campaigning has yet to start, PKR chief and Kajang by-election candidate Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim is starting to make inroads among the Malay voters who have traditionally sided with Barisan Nasional.

Umno supporters are increasingly showing up in the small-scale meetings that Anwar's team organises with residents such as at coffee shops and tazkirah (small discussions after the evening prayers).

The presence of Umno members who stay on to listen to Anwar at these meetings bode well for PKR's aim of retaining the seat, said one of the managers in Anwar's campaign, Mohd Yahya Saari.

"We were quite surprised that they came. And that they stayed on until the end to hear Anwar speak," said Yahya, who is chief of the Kajang by-election operations room.

Although Kajang is considered a PKR bastion – the party won it with a 6,000-vote majority in the 13th general election – most of the support came from Chinese voters.

The party has been trying to widen its appeal to the Malay working and middle classes whose support it will count on if it wants to win federal power.

In order to break Umno's hold over the Malay Muslim psyche, it needs to convince more Malay Muslims to accept its needs-based, multiracial agenda.

Anwar's visits to the Malay villages and residential areas in Batu 10 Cheras and Kampung Sungai Kantan in the constituency also fit into what PKR strategic director Rafizi Ramli alluded to in a past interview.

That Selangor Pakatan Rakyat, as a whole, needs to inoculate Malay Muslims against what it believes are increasing racial and religious provocations during the coalition's second term ruling the state.

For instance, Umno Selangor has gone on a roadshow in the state to drum up support for the ban on the use of the term "Allah" by non-Muslims.

Conversations between PKR activists and Umno supporters, said Yahya, showed an underlying worry about Umno's increasing tilt to the party's ultra conservatives.

"They seem to be quite bothered with how insular Umno has become. They feel that the party nowadays seems to only care for Malays instead of in the past, when the party was more open to all the communities," said Yahya.

However, Universiti Malaya academic Datuk Prof Mohammad Redzuan Othman cautioned against treating the presence of a few Umno supporters at Anwar's programmes as signs of an impending shift in Malay Muslim support in Kajang.

According to surveys by Redzuan's research team, overall support for Barisan Nasional and Pakatan has remained the same since the general election last year.

"There may be a 2% to 3% shift in support. But this is not a big wave," said Redzuan, the director of Universiti Malaya's Centre for Democracy and Elections (UMCEDEL).

In UMCEDEL's latest survey of the Kajang constituency, 69% of respondents felt that the rise in the cost of living would drive support towards Pakatan Rakyat.

The highest number of voters who felt this were civil servants, with 79% of them saying that the rise in the price of goods and services would drive votes to Pakatan.

At the same time, 60% of Malay Muslim Kajang voters feel that the "Allah" issue would not lead to more support for the BN and Umno in the by-election.

The by-election was triggered by the resignation of its state assemblyperson Lee Chin Cheh of PKR.

PKR had admitted that Lee's resignation and the by-election was a carefully laid-out plan, called the "Kajang move" by its architects, for the party's de facto leader Anwar to enter the Selangor government.

Both PKR and Anwar have strongly indicated that it was to allow him to take over as menteri besar from the popular Tan Sri Abdul Khalid Ibrahim.

In the last general election, Lee garnered 19,571 votes, to win by a 6,824 votes. BN's Lee Ban Seng obtained 12,747 votes while Mohamad Ismail of Berjasa got 1,014 votes. – February 21, 2014.

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