

In Pekan, Razak family name shields a beleaguered Najib
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By Ram Anand

While the still-influential former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad might have recently urged the people of Pekan not to vote for Datuk Seri Najib Razak in the next election, friendship and family ties that trace back to the prime minister's father ensure that the son continues to get support from constituents.

Najib may be facing increasing pressure to step down as voices from both within the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) and without, are calling for him to account for alleged corruption scandals.

But Pekan, in the peninsular's largest state of Pahang, is one place that is unlikely to reject him anytime soon.

Najib has been the MP here since 1976, when he stood in after the sudden passing of his father, the late Tun Abdul Razak Hussein who was Malaysia's second prime minister.

Razak had represented Pekan since Malaya's independence and was also born here in 1922.

With such a lineage, Pekan has become almost synonymous with the Razak family.

Rozmah Jusoh, 62, a coffee shop operator in Chini, said her father and Razak were peers in Pulau Keladi, a small settlement just outside the Pekan town. The old house where Razak used to live is still being maintained in Pulau Keladi.

Though the connection is decades-old and far removed from the Razak family, it is still a matter of pride for people here.

"He is a Pahang man. He is a Pekan man. We won't give up on him," Rozmah told The Malaysian Insider.

The fact that Razak helped set up the first Federal Land Development Authority (Felda) settlement in 1959 in Pahang and was subsequently instrumental in bringing more Felda settlements to the areas surrounding Pekan during his tenure as deputy prime minister and prime minister, has made the family's history and the town's even more intertwined.

A matter of pride

Najib has faced only minor hiccups in this Malay-majority constituency.

In the national polls in 1999, he almost lost his seat, ultimately winning by a few hundred votes. That was during Dr Mahathir's tenure, when Umno suffered reduced

support among Malays in a backlash from the sacking of then deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Soon after, a redelineation exercise saw an army camp being included as part of the constituency.

In 2013, when BN suffered its worst results in a general election – losing out in the popular vote for the first time – Najib was far from threatened in Pekan where he defeated PKR's Fariz Musa by a comfortable 35,000-vote majority.

Most of them came from secure vote banks, such as the eight Felda settlements in Pekan. These alone contributed more than 16,000 votes in the general election that year.

With deeply entrenched ties, supporting Najib here is almost obligatory. If not to the man himself, then to Razak, his father.

"For the people here, especially in Felda, Felda is Razak and Razak is Felda," said PKR's Fariz.

Even though PKR received an increase in votes – from 9,000 in 2008 to 15,000 in 2013 – Najib's majority also grew drastically.

The prime minister benefited from a 27% increase in the number of voters in the last elections, which meant 10,000 additional votes for Najib, compared with 2008.

BN strongholds

The Pekan constituency is largely agricultural, besides a car manufacturing plant that provides job opportunities to the local youth.

Home to the palace of the Pahang royal family, it is also known as the state's royal town.

Oil palm, timber and padi farming are among the key industries, and the river that separates Pekan from Kuantan is where fishermen ply their trade.

In Paya Jaras, there is a village full of residents with Cambodian and Burmese heritage, who have been given land for pineapple farming, among others.

This village, Fariz said, is now full of registered voters who almost always lend their support to Najib.

The army camp, which was included under the constituency after 1999, has more than 14,000 registered voters, among military officers and their spouses.

Pekan is also a potpourri of settlements from different parts of the country. While the entire area is almost entirely Malay, there is a strong sense of ancestral identity.

There are the Bugis, whom Najib identifies himself with – and also those from Kelantan, Kedah and other neighbouring states who were brought in during Razak's expansion of Felda settlements.

While neighbouring constituencies, such as Kuantan and Indera Mahkota, have fallen to the opposition PKR, Pekan and neighbouring Rompin remain Umno's bastion.

Tan Sri Jamaluddin Jarjis, the late Rompin MP, known as one of Najib's closest aides, also traced his family tree to Pekan, where his mother was born.

Despite controversies at the national level where their favoured son has been implicated in corruption scandals, keeping Najib as MP due to his bloodline is a matter of pride that voters here seem unlikely to compromise.

"It is an uphill task," Fariz said, of the prospect of defeating Najib on his own turf. – September 6, 2015.

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