

In Bukit Bendera, outstation voters have a big say

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PETALING JAYA: For many, the contest for the Bukit Bendera parliamentary seat in the 14th general election (GE14) seems like a foregone conclusion with a sure win for DAP.

With 76% of the 76,000 voters coming from the Chinese community, it is hard to see how the polls could end any other way, given the Chinese support for the opposition, particularly DAP, in the last two elections.

Malays comprise 14% of voters in Bukit Bendera, while the remaining 10% are Indians and other ethnic groups.

In 2013, political greenhorn Zairil Khir Johari crushed Gerakan's Teh Leong Meng with a 32,778-vote majority.

The constituency's state seats of Tanjung Bungah, Kebun Bungah, Air Puteh and Pulau Tikus saw similar results, with Teh Yee Cheu, Cheah Kah Peng, Lim Guan Eng and Yap Soo Huey winning with comfortable margins.

This time, though, something is different. The air of optimism and excitement which pervaded the two previous elections just isn't there.

Instead, political fatigue and frustration have set in, especially among the youth. This is most apparent in their response to the #UndiRosak movement.

“There is a fear that a lot of people will not return to vote,” Zairil told FMT. “We have a significant amount of voters who don’t live here.”

In fact, Gerakan’s Bukit Bendera coordinator Andy Yong estimates that out-of-towners make up 40% of voters in the constituency.

Zairil, 35, said he understood the frustration of some voters and their reservations about Dr Mahathir Mohamad being chosen as the opposition’s prime minister candidate.

“Two years ago when Pakatan Rakyat was in disarray, I too felt frustrated. But now, we have a stronger leadership and a more united front than ever before.

“For the first time, the opposition has agreed on seat negotiations and manifesto way before the election. We have our act together.”

As far as winning votes go, Zairil is optimistic that the Penang government’s track record and his own as a vocal MP will see DAP retaining Bukit Bendera and the state. This is despite the “attacks” from the mainstream media which paint a bleak picture of the Pearl of the Orient.

“I don’t think there’s an advantage for people to vote for Barisan Nasional (BN) because a lot of the problems are caused by BN, like the rising cost of living, bad public transportation, and GST.”

Zairil added however that there was no room for complacency, saying this was why it was important for voters who were not based in Bukit Bendera to return to vote.

“Bukit Bendera is not traditionally a DAP stronghold. Before 2008, this seat was held by BN for three terms and even Lim Kit Siang has lost here before,” he said, referring to the DAP supremo.

Like Zairil, Gerakan’s Yong believes outstation voters will have a big impact on election results, although not necessarily in his party’s favour.

Speaking to FMT, the lawyer said the battle for Bukit Bendera was very much an uphill one despite Gerakan’s hard work and the issues facing the Penang government such as the undersea tunnel project and the chief minister’s allegedly controversial purchase of a bungalow below market price.

“Personally, I don’t see the tunnel and bungalow issues having much of an impact. Sure, people are less hostile towards us than in 2008 and 2013, but national issues like the cost of living and corruption are still the main concerns of the Bukit Bendera people.”

Yong said this was especially so in Pulau Tikus and Tanjung Bungah, where most of the voters come from professional backgrounds and higher income households.

He said in Kebun Bunga and Air Puteh, there were more voters from the lower income group whose concerns revolved more around local issues, like the lack of affordable housing, access to healthcare and the relocation of traders at Penang Hill.

“As far as Penang goes, I think Pakatan Harapan is likely to continue controlling the state. Still, I think we will do better than in GE13,” he said, adding that he expected Barisan Nasional (BN) to get strong support from the Malays.

Yong said he hoped Bukit Bendera voters would vote for BN as Penang needs a strong opposition to ensure checks and balances within the state government and better representation within the federal government.

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