

In Kulim-Bandar Baharu, winning the rural heart remains key

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KULIM: Located just south of mainland Penang, the Kulim-Bandar Baharu parliamentary seat is very different from the rest of the seats in the rice bowl state of Kedah.

With slightly over 60,000 registered voters, it is one of the few seats with an almost even urban-rural split, with the rural part of the constituency, Bandar Baharu, having slightly more voters than its more urban neighbour of Kulim.



PKR's Saifuddin Nasution Ismail says his loss in GE13 was due to the party's inability to win over rural voters.

It is also one of 50 seats in Peninsular Malaysia where the margin of victory in the 2013 general election was less than 5%, with PKR secretary-general Saifuddin Nasution Ismail losing by a 1,871-vote majority to Umno's Abd Aziz Sheikh Fadzir.

The seat has largely been dominated by the Sheikh Fadzir brothers, with the older of the two, former information minister Abdul Kadir, 78, holding down the fort from 1978 to 2004. He mostly won with an over 10,000-vote majority, with the exception of the 1999 and 2004 general elections.

In 2008, Aziz took over the mantle and contested against then-PKR candidate Zulkifli Noordin, but lost by over 5,000 votes.

Zulkifli became an independent candidate two years later.

In 2013, Saifuddin was nominated to contest the seat but lost to Aziz.

Saifuddin, who is also the Kulim-Bandar Baharu PKR division vice-chief, said one of the reasons he lost in the last election was because he was unable to penetrate the rural areas, especially the rural state seat of Bandar Baharu.

“If you look back at past results, even though I lost by over 1,800 votes, for the Kulim state seat, I won by 900 votes. However, I lost badly in Bandar Baharu.

“So all in all, I lost by 1,871 votes. My election machinery, then together with PAS, could not match the Umno machinery and the influence over the rural voters in the Bandar Baharu seat.

“That was one of the major reasons why I could not make it last time. In our post-mortem, that was obvious,” he said in an interview.

However, this time around, Saifuddin is confident that PKR has managed to overcome that shortcoming, with PPBM as the new Pakatan Harapan (PH) partner.

“For the last one year working with them, I would say that they are doing very well in helping us penetrate rural areas in Bandar Baharu.

“And all the more reason in our seat negotiations, we agreed for the Bandar Baharu state seat to be contested by PPBM,” he said.

The Kulim and Bandar Baharu state seats are currently held by MCA’s Chua Tiong Gee and Umno’s Norsabrina Mohd Noor.

According to Saifuddin, another factor in his loss in GE13 was the postal voters in Kulim-Bandar Baharu.

Although postal voters only numbered some 3,000, “it was enough to contribute to the outcome”, he said.

“This is especially so, when I only managed to get 10% of the postal votes last time.”

Calling voters

But this time, with GE14 just around the corner, Saifuddin said they had the advantage of social media, and a good database of all registered voters in Kulim-Bandar Baharu.

He also said his party workers had managed to set up a call centre, where they had been calling a number of voters in the constituency on a weekly basis for the last six to seven months, to engage with them.

“As for other factors, we are on par with Umno and Barisan Nasional (BN) in terms of explaining the issues very much related to the constituency. We are not that worried about local, state or national issues.

“I can confidently say that we are very much on the right track to win back Kulim-Bandar Baharu,” he said.

In Kulim-Bandar Baharu, where the racial composition is 68% Malay, 20% Chinese and 12% Indian, Saifuddin expects support from the Chinese to remain unchanged.

As for the Indians, Saifuddin said when PKR won the seat in 2008, it managed to secure 60% of the Indian votes, attributing this to the Hindraf factor.

“In 2013, when Hindraf decided to support BN, I lost 18% of Indian support – from 60% to 42%.

“But this time around, with Hindraf deciding to be friendly to PH, it puts me in a very comfortable position.”

Dr Mahathir’s influence

Saifuddin said the pact had also managed to penetrate Felda Gunung Pongsu, one of the Felda settlements in the constituency, which they were not able to achieve in the 2013 election.

“There are about 1,600 voters, and we managed to get 15% of their votes last time. Now with PPBM and the influence of former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, we have penetrated the settlement.”

Saifuddin said he would most likely be contesting the seat again, as he had been given the signal by the top party leadership to go down to the ground, which he has been doing for the past year.

On the issues that PH needs to focus on, Saifuddin said rural voters were heavily influenced by local matters such as the quality of service by local councils, road conditions, and the quality of water supply.

“While they are not very much affected by national issues such as the 1MDB scandal, when you talk about the cost of living, it affects them very much,” he said, adding that race and religion were also a factor.

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Sources: <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/highlight/2018/03/15/in-kulim-bandar-baharu-winning-the-rural-heart-remains-key/>