

Jerai's Acehnese community feels the wind of change

FREE MALAYSIA TODAY

March 18, 2018

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ALOR SETAR: Jerai, a largely rural parliamentary constituency in the state of Kedah, was once held by Sanusi Junid, who recently passed away.

Local boy Sanusi who was born in Yan, was the elected MP for the seat for one term, from 1974 to 1978.

The former Umno strongman was also appointed the rural and regional development minister in 1981, when he was just 38. Five years later, he was appointed agriculture minister.

Sanusi subsequently became the seventh Kedah menteri besar, serving from 1996 to 1999.

A staunch ally of former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Sanusi followed in the latter's footsteps in leaving Umno, and later became the head of PPBM's disciplinary board.

Jerai PPBM division chief Akramsyah Sanusi believes the Acehnese community in Jerai is ready for change.

One of Sanusi's seven children, Akramsyah, is now the Jerai PPBM division chief. He believes his father's legacy and contributions will play a role in the 14th general election (GE14).

"My family is from Yan. We are Acehnese. Acehnese have long been the backbone of support for Barisan Nasional (BN) in Jerai.

"But since my father joined PPBM, and together with his clear support of Mahathir, the Acehnese have been very welcoming of the idea of change," he told FMT.

Akramsyah said the Acehnese community in Yan, Sungai Limau and Jerai had similar feelings about his father and Mahathir as other Acehnese in the country.

"They still appreciate and remember not just the memory of my father and his contributions to the Aceh community in the country, but the assistance of Mahathir to the Acehnese community locally – during the emergency, and after the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004.

"Today, they still appreciate Malaysia's contributions to the rebuilding of Aceh. Mahathir's initial involvement is exemplified by Mukhriz's (Mukhriz Mahathir) NGO being the first to arrive during the tsunami.

“These ties are very strong. In fact I think they will play a big role in deciding who triumphs in Jerai, as well as the three state seats under it,” he said.

The Jerai constituency has a large Acehnese community, with a high concentration in the district of Yan.

Jerai is considered a high-risk seat as it was won by a slim majority by Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department Jamil Khir Baharom in the 13th general election (GE13).

Jamil secured the seat for BN with a 1,196-vote majority, defeating PAS’ Mohd Firdaus Jaafar.

Under the Jerai parliamentary constituency, which comprises 79% Malays, 15% Chinese and 6% Indians, the three state seats are Sungai Limau, Guar Chempedak and Gurun.

Sungai Limau is held by PAS’ Mohd Azam Samad, while Guar Chempedak and Gurun are held by veteran BN state excos Ku Abdul Rahman Ku Ismail (Umno) and Dr Leong Yong Kong (MCA).

Akransyah admitted it would be a challenge to wrest Jerai from BN, especially since its incumbent is a federal minister and has access to resources from federal agencies.

However, Akramsyah said Pakatan Harapan (PH) was aiming for an all-kill – to win the parliamentary and all three state seats.

“We take the challenge seriously. We believe we have done an adequate job to have a chance at winning.

“Of course, the proof is in the pudding. We are still working hard to make ourselves more acceptable to all of the electorate and winnable across the constituency. Our target is to win 4-0.

“I am fairly confident we have a good chance, because we see support coming not just from those who used to support BN, but also those who used to support PAS. It is a broad base of support from these two groups. I am quietly confident we are on the right track,” he said.

Akramsyah said the Mahathir sentiment sweeping across Kedah was also sweeping over Jerai.

“What we gather from the sentiment on the ground, which is similar across Kedah, is that people are affected by the fact that Mahathir is on our side and is leading the charge for PH. That is a key factor for any location.”

Poor maintenance

Akramsyah also pointed to issues on the ground in the constituency, which has over 74,000 registered voters, citing the problem of flooding which occurs in areas like Bedong and Gurun.

He said during the major flooding last November, the opposition was able to hit the ground faster in assisting flood victims to clean their houses.

BN, on the other hand, was able to offer more material support as it was the government of the day.

“However, the blame for why the floods occurred and how they occurred falls squarely on BN’s mismanagement.

“For instance, the poor dredging over the past few years has led to significant siltation around the Bedong-Gurun area, and that was a major contributor to the floods, as well as the delay in the recovery process.

“It continues to be a risk. The irony is, this is not the first time the floods have happened and the issue has been raised many times. People have been complaining but no action has been taken (by the MP or the state assemblymen).”

Akramsyah said there were other small but significant issues which need resolving, like better village roads and proper lighting at accident-prone intersections.

He also pointed to the failure to hand over 100 units of terrace houses which were built for those affected by the coastal erosion along the beaches of Sungai Limau and Dulang.

He said the houses had yet to be handed over to the state despite being completed two years ago.

“It has been two years, and the houses are still not allocated to the victims. This year, they (the authorities) called for applications, and this has resulted in a new problem.

“All of a sudden, you have 2,000 applications. What does that tell you? When I interacted with the young families that applied, the answer was simple: there is inadequate housing in the Jerai area,” he said.

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Sources: <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/ge14/2018/03/18/jerai-acehnese-community-feels-the-wind-of-change/>