

In Nibong Tebal, bogeyman tag haunts BN, PH

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PETALING JAYA: In Nibong Tebal, PKR's greatest concern isn't the flooding or controversial undersea tunnel project, issues which feature more prominently on Penang Island.

Instead, it is the perception of DAP dominance that poses a threat to PKR, which controls the Malay-majority seat eyed by both Umno and PKR.

"Umno is harping on the issue of DAP's dominance. They are saying that DAP is very dominant and this perception will have an effect, especially among Malay voters," said Nibong Tebal MP Mansor Othman.

Last November, Mansor criticised the DAP-led state government for barring a PKR assemblyman from giving out flood aid to his constituents.

Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng defended the decision as an administrative one, although Mansor said it could be seen as an attempt to sideline PKR's role in the Penang government.

Speaking to FMT, Mansor, a former deputy chief minister, said however that the incident was an isolated case.

On the ground, he added, the bigger challenge was the battle of perceptions, with Umno telling the Malays that they would be better off under the Barisan Nasional (BN) component party.

The constituency and its three state seats of Jawi (DAP), Sungai Bakap (PKR) and Sungai Aceh (BN) are home to 73,000 voters, with Malays comprising 47%, Chinese 36% and Indians 17%.

But Mansor, who is also state PKR chief, said the Penang government had brought many improvements to the life of Malays, citing the tremendous increase in allocations for religious activities and initiatives.

“Before 2008, only RM14 million was allocated for activities related to Islam. Since we’ve taken over, this has been increased steadily. Now, this allocation stands at RM64 million a year.”

While acknowledging the challenge of a three-way battle in Nibong Tebal, Mansor said Pakatan Harapan’s (PH) newest member, PPBM, could bring 5% of the Malay vote over to the opposition pact.

Meanwhile, Nibong Tebal Umno Youth chief Mohd Norhiesam Ismail said although Malays were the majority, Umno still needed support from the Chinese and Indians.

“Here, the Chinese will be the kingmakers because the Malay vote will be split,” he told FMT.

The problem, he said, was that Chinese voters would place greater importance on national issues, which would make BN’s track record in serving the people less of a factor.

“Service-wise, I believe we have served the people better. The problem is that DAP is using Umno as a bogeyman to scare the Chinese, saying we are dominating the BN component parties and on issues related to 1MDB and the economy.”

To make matters worse, said Norhiesam, MCA and Gerakan weren’t responding quickly to DAP’s claims or sufficiently mobilising their people on the ground.

“We can see that MIC and MyPPP are actively going to the ground to reach out to the Indian community but we need more support from MCA and Gerakan. We need them to do more.

“In BN, we have prepared explanations to counter DAP’s various claims on 1MDB, the economy, and governance. So MCA and Gerakan need to be more aggressive, not just in countering their claims, but also going on the offensive and raising issues like the undersea tunnel and floods affecting the state.”

Admittedly, Norhiesam said he had yet to see a change in sentiment among the Chinese although there was an increase in support from the Malays.

“But I see a wave of support among the Indian community, generated by our Nibong Tebal BN parliamentary coordinator Shaik Hussein Mydin.”

Speculation is rife that Shaik Hussein will represent BN in Nibong Tebal, replacing Penang Umno chief Zainal Abidin Osman.

As for PAS, the Islamist party believes it can put up a good fight despite history indicating otherwise. In the 13th general election, PAS was trashed in a rare three-way contest in Sungai Aceh against BN and PKR.

While BN and PKR won over 6,000 votes, PAS only managed to garner 690.

But Nibong Tebal PAS chief Mohamad Ahmad told FMT that this time around, PAS could count on support from Malay voters who were sick of BN.

“I understand that PKR and PPBM will end up clashing in Nibong Tebal, so this might affect votes for PH.

“Now, many Malays support PAS because we are no longer with DAP. Malays don’t like DAP because of their opposition to the proposed amendments to Act 355,” he said, referring to PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang’s private member’s bill to amend the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965.

Mohamad said PAS would also put up a strong fight over the split in votes, with the support of its over 2,000 members in Nibong Tebal.

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