

A VERY tight race



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Apr 24, 10

7:49pm

TEXT SIZE



COMMENT From the ground in Hulu Selangor – in this huge constituency the size of Malacca – predictions from afar feed the chatter. Both sides remain quietly confident of victory based on different assumptions.

For Pakatan Rakyat, the focus is on maintaining previous levels of support and a firm belief in the people of Selangor's commitment to change and opposition to Umno. For BN, the focus is on winning back support in non-Malay areas, their new campaigning message of '1Malaysia', centred on Prime Minister Najib Razak, and the tried method of money.

The funds have flowed over the past few days, from small payments of RM100 to RM50,000. Najib's three days of campaigning in the by-election indicates his personal stake in the contest.

I have tremendous respect for Ong Kian Ming's work and his **bold prediction**. He is willing to stand up and take a position.

From where I stand in the constituency, there are four unanswered questions that obscure any analysis.

Police, EC put to test



Foremost is the number of voters living outside the constituency that will come home. The traffic in Hulu Selangor has been heavy and reflects a steady stream of voters coming home. It is estimated that over 8,000 voters live outside - almost all of them are young and working elsewhere.

There is real concern that voters will be prevented from voting tomorrow by police's road blocks. The police have a difficult job given the number of political tourists that have flooded in, but ultimately tomorrow and tonight will test their professionalism.

I believe that if over 50 percent of the voters come home, Zaid Ibrahim will win. The out-of-town voters are committed to change. The BN wants a lower turnout

of these voters to assure its own victory.

The second unknown is the impact of **“moving”** nearly 14,000 voters arbitrarily. Most of these voters are older non-Malays. Many voters are already reporting that they have been kept off the list. The BN campaign has quietly suggested that Pakatan has done this intentionally. Pakatan in return has suggested that this is the product of the Election Commission.

Logistically, this will make for a challenge for Pakatan, whose machinery is not as well-oiled as that of BN in Hulu Selangor. The issue is not only that voters have been moved to distant polling stations, but many of them have been moved into unfamiliar areas – such as from a Chinese school to a religious school.

Patience will be needed on the part of the electorate. This will threaten turnout and possibly add to tensions tomorrow. If many voters get fed up, this will improve BN's odds. The EC has not fully explained this arbitrary movement and their professionalism too will be tested tomorrow.

The last time this happened was in Gombak in 2004, and this led to considerable frustration and confusion. Hulu Selangor voters are likely to be more patient, but this is difficult to assess.



MIC's loss of face

A related issue involves the MIC. Traditionally the party has many of its voters in its parliamentary seats registered outside. They are brought “home” to vote. P Kamalanathan himself is apparently registered in S Samy Vellu's former seat of Sungai Siput. The MIC party has been largely excluded from the campaign as Umno has dominated the ground.



There is considerable loss of face as a result of the party being passed over in their candidate selection and many consider Kamalanathan to be a traitor to the party for kissing the hand of the DPM.

This may affect the party's own efforts in supporting the MIC candidate. Their presence this round is lower than previous campaigns. Part of this is a result of the by-election dynamics. Another part of this is a sense that Umno bullied the party publicly and many are smarting.

The final unknown is the impact of “patronage”. Traditional development promises have been comparatively lacking this round, due in part to the size of the constituency. It is also a product of the fact that many of the “hard” deliverables of development - road, water, electricity, and schools - have been provided.

The areas of contestation have involved land and scams/unfulfilled promises linked to private companies. The BN hopes that by giving funds upfront, promising more and addressing areas such as Sungai Buaya where feelings of betrayal run deep, they can win over voters. They are betting with serious money, from promises up to RM50,000.

In my view, while this can make an impact, it may not deliver as much as they expect.

Given the unknowns, I am refraining from a prediction. As I have been on the ground the past few days, I have seen Pakatan gain ground. It remains very tight.

Statistics may prove to be correct, but ultimately it will be human behaviour tomorrow from the professionalism of the EC to the patience of the voters that will make the difference.

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