

Notes from the campaign: Lembah Pantai



I had shown up early to a political talk, or *ceramah*, in the heart of Pantai Dalam, a key part of the Lembah Pantai constituency represented over the past decade by Nurul Izzah of the opposition PKR but now defended by new candidate Fahmi Fadzil, her political aide. Enticed by the promise of street theatre, it was clearly a Pakatan Harapan (PH) event, with the tents festooned with light blue, red and white party bunting, and party leader (and Nurul Izzah's father) Anwar Ibrahim's face on the banner. This was after passing a sea of dark blue Barisan Nasional (BN) flags, matched by a density of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) flags with candidate Fahmi's smiling face on the banners, before a block of green PAS flags.

There were about 60 people throughout the two hours I was there, with women and young children sitting patiently in the block of chairs behind the second tent pitched above a road, making up half

the crowd. The rest were men on motorbikes, who stood across the stage at the main road's edges, and the community's village elders who sat near the stage. The emcee, a friendly man in his early 70s, invited the crowd to sit further front, and a group of young men, and me and my gangly tall American colleague (clearly all outsiders) were the only ones who took up the invitation.



Street theater broke up the monotony of political speeches. Although amateurish and simplistic, it appealed to the children and women, responding loudly to the evil man in the clown mask. The crowd's engagement with the theater figures was amusing: there was the caricature of an UMNO politician, a useless Tuan Mohammad in a batik shirt, sunglasses and moustache, and the Evil Clown; there were murmurs of disgust and cynicism in the phrases bantered ('he only comes to call during election time', 'pembohong' or liar, etc). It was difficult to tell if the crowd was genuinely angered by current policies or whether they were being good sports, just channelling their disappointment with the BN's alleged mismanagement of the economy. The Goods and Services Tax (GST) and *harga minyak* (the price of petrol) were two points all the speakers kept returning to all night. The opposition coalition's agenda was focused on eradicating the GST if it won power, and to stabilize petrol prices or defend petrol subsidies. For PH, these two issues hit

the working class the most, and the opposition was quick to warn that should BN win again, the GST would rise.

All four speakers for the night were men in their 30s, the sole female speaker having cancelled. It was ironic as the PKR speaker spent a good length of time emphasising women's capabilities and the important roles they could play as leaders in PH. Although there were no female party representatives formally speaking, there were female audience members who joined key Teater Jalanan women activists in the program, confronting the Tuan YB and the Evil Clown characters in the show, calling them out for their corrupt practices and racist tactics of 'divide and conquer'. These women rallied the audience to reject the status quo, with words on cardboard like 'Corruption' and 'X' pinned to the map of Malaysia's peninsula, and joined in singing 'Suara Rakyat' at the end of each sketch when Good (female) triumphed over Evil (male).



Most striking were not the politicians, who were all articulate and smart young men, but the emcee who, in between speakers, drew a bigger picture of the ills of Malaysian society as seen from the ground up. A former UMNO man, he'd spent 65 years living in the Pantai Dalam area, although originally hailed from Penang where he was born and went to school. He self-identified as a

‘mamak’, or a Malaysian Indian-Muslim.

Sure, he’d seen the development and modern changes to the area under Shahrizat’s time – expensive condos, roads and highways that made the neighbourhood almost unrecognisable. But he was not impressed. The people of Bukit Kerinchi could ill afford these places – did these buildings constitute ‘housing’ for the constituents? These changes happened because someone’s pockets were filled, someone who could have ‘cows in condos’, he insinuated. Another issue which also upset him was the name change from Bukit [Kerinchi to Bangsar South](#). Why not call it Kerinchi Heights, he suggested. It was a question of heritage (warisan), and he qualified this by adding that it wasn’t about preserving Malay identity (looking my way as I seemed to be the only Malaysian Chinese in the audience). It was about preserving the history of the area, founded in the 1890s by one Haji Abdullah Hukum, who originated from Kampong Kerinchi in Sumatera. And it was a history threatened with erasure by the forces of gentrification in the name of development.

In between the speakers, he reminded the audience that they should not fall for UMNO’s allegedly racist speech demonising the DAP and painting a zero-sum game between the Malays and the Chinese. As someone from Penang (he referred to ‘orang Penang’) who still has roots there, he explained how when the Malay community went to seek the help of then Penang chief minister Koh Tsu Koon of BN party Gerakan, about getting land for a Malay cemetery, they waited for promises that were never fulfilled. But when the DAP took power, new chief minister Lim Guan Eng gave the Malay community the land for their cemetery. He explained how the new chief minister gave this and more to the Malays of Penang, in recognition of their religion and culture, that he also gave to other ethnic communities what they requested (Teater Jalanan also raised a similar point earlier about UMNO playing the racial card to divide Malaysians).



When candidate Fahmi finally spoke, he demonstrated working experience in the area (after all, he had worked closely with previous MP Nurul Izzah), knowing well the nuts and bolts of the neighbourhood: lifts that failed to work and were never repaired, other infrastructure and services promised federally and never delivered, etc. What was heartwarming and an imminent sign of change ('ubah') was his promise to be a representative for all constituents, even members of the police (and their families) whose flats were now included in the recent redelineation exercise of the Lembah Pantai electorate. It was a stark contrast to the usual bullying tactics of UMNO government, which usually punishes opposition voters by withholding services.

Speakers explained that a 92-year-old man had no agenda except to set Malaysia on a sound economic path again, and that the incumbent BN federal government ran a system that had to be completely dismantled, from top to bottom, because the corruption was so endemic. The emcee too had addressed the issue of Malaysian sovereignty lost to China in the form of its land reserves.

I left wondering if the community tonight felt the weight of this burden on their shoulders as I did: as stakeholders exercising their voting power on 9th May, will they help Dr Mahathir steer the beloved

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ship in the right direction, towards a brighter future for their children?