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Two friends in four cornered contest for Sungai Bakap

A. Kathirasen; Noor Adzman Baharuddin

NIBONG TEBAL, Wed. - Four persons, including two best friends, are contesting for the Sungai Bakap State seat in a by-election called following the death of Barisan Nasional Assemblyman Ooi Theng Bok on Sept 23.

Returning Officer Ahmad Phesal Talib announced that the nominations of Lai Chew Hock of the Barisan Nasional, Goh Kheng Huat of the DAP and independents Abu Harith Ahmad and K. "Mittai" Ganesh were accepted at the end of nominations today. Polling is on Nov 8.

Lai and Goh are pals, with Goh being best man at Lai's wedding years ago.

Election Commission chairman Datuk Harun Din, who was present throughout, said later that everything went smoothly.

Lai was accompanied to the nomination centre at the Jawi multi-purpose hall, about 6km from here, by Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Mohd Shariff Omar, Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Ibrahim Saad, Deputy Primary Industries Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein, State MCA and MIC chairmen Datuk Dr Sak Cheng Lum and Dr K. Rajapathy respectively and other BN leaders.

They marched from the Jawi Inn to the hall, a distance of half-a-kilometre, at 9.30am. Lai, who was accompanied by his proposer Dr Goh Cheng Teik and seconder Hashim Chik, submitted his nomination form at 9.40am.

Later other BN leaders joined them including Perak Menteri Besar Tan Sri Ramli Ngah Talib, Deputy Home Affairs Minister Datuk Tajol Rosli Ghazali, Deputy International Trade and Industry Minister Kerk Choo Ting and Perak MIC chairman Datuk K. Kumaran.

Goh was accompanied to the hall by DAP secretary-general Lim Kit Siang, State DAP chairman Teoh Teik Huat and other party leaders including the newly elected MP for Teluk Intan M. Kulasegaran.

Goh, walking with proposer Tan Hin Ho and seconder Ong Seng San, submitted his paper at 9.59am.

Ganesh arrived at the hall with a small band of people about 9.20am. He submitted his nomination paper at 9.53am. His proposer was C. Marimuthu while G. Mardammuthu was his seconder.

Abu Harith, who was also accompanied by a small group of supporters, submitted his paper at 10.15am accompanied by proposer Ibrahim Abdul Rahman and seconder S. Nathan.

Lai, 32, is a State Gerakan Youth vice-chairman and a local boy. He comes from a reputable and rich philanthropist family in Simpang Ampat. This is his maiden foray into an election. He is married with three children.

Lai was confident of the full backing of BN component parties.

Goh, who is contesting in an election for the third time, is the State DAP organising secretary. The 34-year-old managing director is married with two children. He is among the DAP's young blood.

He contested and lost the Machang Bubuk seat in 1986 to the BN's Goik Hock Lai and in the 1995 general election, he lost by 661 votes to another BN man, Tan Cheng Liang, for the Jawi State seat.

Goh said his chances were not good but he was contesting to offer an opportunity to the voters to send a message to the BN Government that they

were unhappy with the current situation in Sungai Bakap, the State and the country.

Ganesh, 44, who sells Indian sweet cakes, is well known in the Indian community and is chairman of the local Sithi Vinayagar temple and is involved in many other temples and Indian organisations in the constituency.

He said he was contesting because the State Government had not rebuilt the Sungai Jawi Tamil school which was razed two years ago; there was unfair dispensation of Government funds for Hindu temples; and a Gerakan leader had derided the Indian community by claiming Indians could be bought over by providing alcohol and food.

He said he would withdraw if the Government would accede to his requests and that he respected Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Koh and was not against the Government.

Abu Harith, 40, a former teacher and former S46 member, is well known in the constituency, having been involved in various social organisations.

Abu Harith said the BN had not done enough for the constituency.

Meanwhile, Koh urged the constituents to vote the Barisan Nasional to show their support to the party leadership led by Dr Mahathir and his deputy, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

DAP supremo Lim said the by-election was an opportunity for the people to pass a mid-term verdict on the performance of the Barisan Nasional Government.

"Sungai Bakap voters can represent the people of Penang and the rest of the country to express their unhappiness and opposition on several matters including the recent fee increases for international passports and driving licences.

"Also, it is most unlikely that the DAP could win in the election, but the prospect of reducing the BN's majority is there," he said.