

**DAP puts its faith in young professionals**  
**New Straits Times (Columns)**  
**27 Aug 2007**  
**CHOK SUAT LING**

DAP has ambitious plans for the next general election. Oppositionists tell CHOK SUAT LING that new faces could help them achieve their goals.

YOUNG, English-speaking and professional. The DAP is actively hunting for candidates with such attributes to join its ranks.

The party is counting on these young professionals, over time, to help organise the DAP more professionally and, most importantly, help it win more votes.

"We will be able to reach out to voters better, and deliver our message in a more coherent manner via more efficient vehicles," explains Tony Pua, economic adviser to the DAP secretary-general.

Pua, an Oxford University graduate and former CEO and founder of a public-listed IT company, was one of the young professionals enlisted. He joined the party this year, along with blogger Jeff Ooi and Malaysian Tamil Education and Research Foundation immediate past president M. Manogaran.

The DAP hopes such candidates will boost its credibility and image, factors crucial in attracting the fence-sitters.

Young professionals in the party could result in more seats won in the coming general election, whether they are fielded directly as candidates or as part of the campaign organisation team, claims Pua.

Insiders say an estimated 30 per cent of DAP's candidates will be new faces. Pua, Ooi and Manogaran will be among them. However, they will not be contesting seats held by DAP incumbents.

DAP is clearly on an all-out mission to seize as many seats as it can in the polls, which must be held by July 2009. The Chinese-dominated party has high hopes, based on the groundswell of discontent among Chinese voters as indicated in a recent survey by the independent Merdeka Centre. According to respondents, Malaysian Chinese are highly dissatisfied with the country's economic policies and two out of three will vote opposition.

The outcomes of two recent by-elections in Machap and Ijok appear to bear out the Merdeka Centre's findings.

In Machap, MCA won but with a reduced majority. In Chinese majority areas, there was an estimated five per cent vote swing in favour of the opposition. In Ijok, there was a marked increase in Chinese support for Parti Keadilan Rakyat.

These developments have buoyed the DAP's mood, now described by members as one of "cautious optimism".

Former DAP Bandar Kuching member of parliament Sim Kwang Yang reckons the DAP should do better, since "it is at rock bottom right now".

"There is discontent among Chinese voters now with ethnic, educational and religious issues," he confirms.

Sim, who retired in 1995 and is now working with a non-governmental organisation called Omnicron Learning Circle, asserts that these issues could cause the MCA to lose many votes.

Pua narrows these issues down to four: The rising cost of living; an increase in crime rate, particularly in urban centres; the Barisan Nasional's (BN) unfulfilled promises such as to combat corruption; and incidents such as the kris-waving at the last Umno general assembly and bocor episode in parliament.

Pua notes that the issues of crime and economy affect urban voters the most and, statistically, the Chinese constitute the largest proportion of urban voters in the country. "The man on the street sees things as having gone worse, and not better."

DAP researcher Liew Chin Tong is optimistic that the party will gain a few more constituencies, particularly state seats in Perak, Selangor and Penang, all in Chinese-majority areas.

He says new faces like Pua, Ooi, Manogaran and "a few more other influential people expected to join the party" will boost DAP's chances beyond the Chinese-speaking community:

"We hope to carry these new faces into state assemblies and parliament. We want to change the people's perception of the DAP," he says.

Since the 1990s, the party has not been able to reach out to the English-speaking community due to several factors, including media restrictions, he claims.

"We now hope to be able to expand beyond the usual suspects and give the DAP a more multi racial face," Liew says.

The party wants to win more seats, even in constituencies where Chinese voters are in the minority, in order to expand. In the 12 parliamentary seats it now holds, all have over 70 per cent Chinese voters except for Ipoh Barat, with 63 per cent.

While the party certainly expects its vote pool to increase in the next general election, insiders concede that it is quite difficult to say to what extent the increase will result in parliamentary or state seats being won.

Pua notes that barring two or three seats which the party currently holds, the rest — whether won or lost in the previous election — are not safe seats.

"Therefore, we take these seats very seriously and will work hard towards winning more seats than previously. We do, however, expect gains, if any, to come from the urban-centric seats which we will contest."

A DAP source says the party, which plans to contest 54 parliamentary seats and 115 state seats, has good prospects in Selangor as it lies within the heart of urban disenchantment. He surmises that Petaling Jaya Utara, now held by Datin Paduka Chew Mei Fun, and perhaps Serdang, held by Datuk Yap Pian Hon, may be ripe for the picking, but is not as confident about the other constituencies.

"Unless there is a Malay swing, which is unlikely this time around, it will be difficult for us

elsewhere in Selangor as most of the seats are multi-racial."

He adds that in Perak, the DAP has a fighting chance in Bruas as incumbent Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik will not be in the picture, as well as in Teluk Intan and Kampar.

"We also have a chance in Bukit Bendera and Jelutong in Penang if BN puts up new faces. The incumbents (Datuk Seri Chia Kwang Chye and Datuk Lee Kah Choon, respectively) are quite popular. We should also be able to get back what used to be our stronghold, Kota Melaka."

The party is quite encouraged by its performance in last year's Sarawak state election, when it won six state seats (up from one previously), and believes it could pick up at least two more parliamentary seats. In Sabah, it may have a chance in Sandakan.

But analysts caution the DAP against over-confidence. While its optimism may be boosted by the Merdeka survey, Chinese sentiment is not the same all over the country.

Merdeka Centre director Ibrahim Suffian feels the DAP will have a good chance in urban areas in the Klang Valley, Penang and Perak, but "these are places where they are already strong".

In rural areas, even those that are majority-Chinese, and in multiracial communities, they should not expect any major difference, Ibrahim warns.

"In the rural areas, the people are riding a commodities boom. There is not so much of this dissent percolating in public space."

Ibrahim predicts the party will perform better, but not overwhelmingly so, and that the results will not be even across the country.

Copyright © 2007 NST Online