

DAP banking on ceramah charm
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Opposition party DAP is hoping that a change of tactic - by holding more ceramah - in wooing the Machap voters will bring them good fortune in the by-election tomorrow.

The party is pretty confident with its new approach that it thinks it can garner half of the Chinese votes for its candidate Liou Chen Kuang.

Liou, a 33-year-old businessman on his second attempt to win the seat, said the party felt that it could reach out better to the voters by holding more ceramah this time around, as opposed to other types of campaigning.

Liou said that he held only one ceramah during the 2004 general election when he was defeated by incumbent Poh Ah Tiam with a 4,562-majority vote. Liou had garnered 1,285 votes in the election.

"But this time around, we have ceramah almost every night," the opposition candidate told Malaysiakini just before making his way to another round of speaking engagements in Machap Baru on Monday night.

The party clearly feels that the political talks have had an impact on the Machap voters, especially the Chinese voters.

"We are confident of a better performance (as compared to the 2004 general election). We are looking at getting a total of 50 percent Chinese votes from Machap Baru and Machap Umbor," said DAP election strategist Liew Chin Tong.

These two main polling districts are dominated by about 3,500 Chinese voters. There are some 9,000 eligible voters in the Machap state seat, out of which 45 percent are Chinese, 38 percent Malays and 15 percent Indians.

For its part the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional has been out to woo the voters with its carnival-style of campaigning, including holding karaoke sessions.

The by-election was called after the death of the three-term incumbent Poh, from BN, on March 15. Liou will be facing BN's Lai Meng Chong, 56 in the polls.

Political speech versus karaoke session

When Malaysiakini visited Machap on Monday night, campaigns by both parties in Machap Baru saw an equal turnout.

DAP's ceramah involving its women leaders - Malacca's state assemblyperson Betty Chew, DAP Wanita head and Bukit Mertajam MP Chong Eng and Batu Gajah MP Fong Po Kuan - attracted about 200 people to hear various national issues being debated.

The topic for the day ranged from the massive floods in Johor at the end of last year and early this year to the closure of the original Damansara school in Kuala Lumpur.

No major local issues were raised except for a minor flood that day in the polling district of Melaka Pindah.

The crowd enjoyed listening to the three women speakers, responding with laughter and applause from time to time.

Just a short distance away, MCA was holding its own campaign, attracting the elderly Chinese voters by playing popular songs from yesteryears.

This is the karaoke session ala MCA. Residents are invited to the Koperasi Machap Baru Flats to belt out their favourite songs. Songs like 'Maan sui cheen saan jung see ching' by Hong Kong veteran singer Liza Wang seemed to be the crowd favourite.

The 'karaoke get-together' was held at the flats where 88 families live and featured a short speech by Malacca Chief Minister Mohd Ali Rustam who called on the voters to reject the DAP candidate.

He claimed that Liou could only be seen around the area when an election is called. BN's Lai is a local born.

Some residents claimed that participants taking part in the karaoke will get RM20 for each song they sing.

Local resident Loo Piang Mui, 47, who was at the karaoke session made it clear where his loyalty lied. He said the people in Machap Baru appreciated the developments brought by the late Poh.

"We believe the BN candidate (Lai Meng Chong) can carry to serve the people well. We are not familiar with Liou," Loo added.

There is no doubt that Lai will be able to gain a strong support from his hometown of Machap Baru. However the situation may be tricky for him in Machap Umbor, said a source close to the candidate.

The reason for this is because a large number of voters from Machap are non-residents, returning home to vote while being aware of various national issues that has been raised by DAP.

"We hope they do not return during the polling day," said the source.

The trump card

While DAP is quite confident in raking in the support of the Chinese voters, the party is not so happy with its campaigns in the Malay areas.

A joint ceramah involving top leaders from DAP and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) on Monday night at the Felda Tun Ghafar Baba Hutan Percha area attracted a crowd less than 40 people, with more than a third of it being police special branch personnel.

Just hours earlier, at the same place, a BN function held by Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak was attended by about 400 people.

DAP's Liew admits his party's inability to attract the Malay voters but hoped that their trump card to be released today would change the scenario at the last moment.

That secret weapon is opposition icon and PKR adviser Anwar Ibrahim who will be in Machap today, making visits to the Malay areas and ending the campaign period with a ceramah tonight.

DAP believes Anwar can play an important role in winning over the support of the Machap Malay voters. However the problem with this is that most of these Malay voters are Umno members.

"We will only stand a better chance if there is a low-turnout on the polling day among the Malay voters," said Liew.

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