

All-out fight for SibU on the cards

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GE13 WATCH Given that incumbent Wong Ho Leng will not defend the SibU parliamentary seat on grounds of illness, the DAP can expect an all-out fight from rivals in Sarawak.

The Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) is expected to field a heavyweight - Vincent Lau, 65 - in its bid to reclaim the seat lost by a slim majority of 398 votes in the 2010 by-election.

Vincent will face Oscar Ling, a 36-year-old pharmacist and Wong's special assistant, who was named last month as the DAP's candidate.

There is little doubt that Vincent stands ahead of Ling in terms of personality as well as familiarity in the local community.

Vincent, while a newcomer to politics, is a prominent figure as he is second-in-command of the family-run business, KTS Group, in SibU.

He is widely recognised for contributions to education and social work over the last two decades. This has earned him the honorific of 'Temenggong' from the Sarawak government.

Still, this could work against him because the political scene in SibU had been dominated by rich and powerful business figures for two decades up to 2008, said Sarawak DAP secretary Chong Chieng Jen.

They have found involvement in politics to be beneficial to their family-run businesses, he claimed.

The two parliamentary seats of SibU and Lanang have been dominated by such personalities in previous elections.

SUPP had fielded Robert Lau Hoi Chew for five terms. Upon his death in 2010 and in the resulting by-election, the party's Robert Lau Hui Yew was defeated by the DAP's Wong.

Four-term Lanang MP and SibU mayor Tiong Thai King is a younger brother of Rimbunan Hijau Group boss and tycoon Tiong Hiew King.

While the BN has yet to announce its candidates for the 13th general election, Tiong and Vincent are on the list for Lanang and SibU respectively.

SibU SUPP chairperson Wong Soon Koh has reportedly described them as "the most winnable candidates".

Another of Wong's special aides, Alice Lau - 32 and also a pharmacist - will contest in Lanang. She was defeated in last state election in the Bawang Assan constituency by the SUPP's Wong Soon Koh.

The DAP has claimed to see a decline in support for the BN in Lanang, an urban seat with 72 percent Chinese voters.

SUPP's 'convincing candidate'

A source close to the Lau family told Malaysiakini that the internal rift within SUPP has dampened support for the party, and this is why it has to field a convincing candidate in Sibü.

"By fielding Vincent, SUPP hopes the voters will choose his personality over the party - it hopes they will forget about the infighting and remember Lau's contributions to the community," the source said.

He also said Vincent has a good relationship with the Tiongs and that the two families have agreed to support each other in the election, even to the extent of persuading employees to vote for the respective candidates.

When contacted, Vincent urged voters not to label him as a "business tycoon candidate" and not to judge him based on his background, saying this would be unfair to him.

"I just happen to come from a business family and have a better financial position than others," he said, also rejecting the notion that rich candidates would stoop to buying votes.

Asked if he will quit the family-run business to become a full-time politician should he win the Sibü seat, Vincent said he will be able to attend to both business and politics.

He is prepared for the duties that await an elected representative, including "visiting flooded areas and even check on street lighting if need be".

Both the Lau and Tiong families have one thing in common - control over several newspapers and publications.

However, Vincent said he will not use these to promote himself, explaining that he wants the media to report fairly on the election campaign.

SUPP strategies have 'failed twice'

The DAP's Bukit Bendera MP and political strategist Liew Chin Tong is unfazed by SUPP's strategy of fielding candidates from rich families.

He pointed out that these candidates had been defeated in the Sibü parliamentary

by-election in 2010 and in the 2011 state election.

"When society is mature, (you) can't buy votes, but if society is immature and poor, money will have its say," he noted.

Liew (right) said he sees GE13 as a battle based on political alliances and demand for change, rather than on the personality of candidates.

The DAP is more optimistic about winning Lanang than keeping Sibuluan, a SUPP fortress. Until the 2010 by-election, the party had lost the seat only once - by 141 votes in the 1982 general election.

Sibuluan has more than 64,000 voters, of whom 65 percent are Chinese and 25 percent are bumiputeras.

"Although it is named Sibuluan, the constituency is located on the outskirts of Sibuluan town and has a mix of urban and rural voters from the BN's stronghold," Liew said.

"We never dreamt we would be defeated (Robert) in the by-election."

The DAP had benefited from a large batch of voters returning home to vote in the by-election, which saw a 70 percent turn-out compared to 67 percent in 2008, he added.

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