

Multi-ethnic face for Pakatan's Kluang campaign

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Led by DAP strategist Liew Chin Tong (left) who is contesting the Kluang parliamentary constituency, the team comprises the Youth national secretaries of PAS and DAP - Khairul Faizi and Tan Hong Pin, who are contesting the state seats of Mahkota and Mengkibol respectively.

Almost all the posters and billboards show the same image - the three candidates in white shirts, holding hands against orange-coloured background and with the party symbols placed at one corner. Orange is the Pakatan theme colour.

The three Pakatan parties share operation centres in the constituencies, probably a first in Johor.

"This election is different from the previous ones, so we need to fight together ... we must contest as a team with PKR and PAS to achieve maximum impact as a coalition," Liew had told the DAP grassroots before nomination day on April 20.

"Only with maximum impact can we create a domino effect. If we can win many racially mixed seats, BN will lose federal power."

He has lost no time in putting the idea into action.

Kluang is deemed by Pakatan to be one of its most winnable seats in Johor, as half of the electorate comprises Chinese Malaysians. BN's Hou Kok Chung had won the seat as a novice in 2008 by 3,781 votes.

Chinese make up 49 percent of the voter base, while Malay and Indian voters make up 39 percent and 10 percent respectively.

No personal attacks thus far

The election campaign has also set the stage for a battle between Hou - a former Chinese studies lecturer and Liew - his one-time student - at the New Era College in Kajang, Selangor

Both are seen as gentlemen who have a good public image. As a result, personal attacks have been missing thus far in the campaign for Kluang, a hilly town in central Johor.

Hou, popularly known as a "nice guy" in the constituency, is leveraging on his various contributions to the development of Chinese higher education, including governmental recognition of degree programmes in Taiwan and China, and his solid record in local service.

Liew, an overseas graduate in political science, has taken his campaign to a higher perspective, stressing on the national political scenario and the need for a new federal government to implement genuine structural reforms.

Hou has adopted a soft approach, even avoiding comment on political and policy issues when questioned by reporters.

"Over the past five years, most of the voters have had good interaction with me. I will remind them of my service record, and leave it to them to judge the results," he said when asked about his strengths in the campaign.

Taman Titiwangsa Umno branch chief Khusairi Mohamed (left), when met, said Hou has visited the constituency frequently and has always shown concern for the people.

He cited the example of a lamp post that had been malfunctioning for eight years before Hou got this resolved.

The BN campaign machinery has, however, been affected by the late announcement of the candidate - an outcome of bickering between Hou and MCA vice-president Gan Ping Sieu, who was dropped but has pledged support for Hou.

Up to yesterday, posters of Hou and BN candidates for the two state seats under Kluang, were still not up. In contrast, posters and banners of Liew and the two state-level candidates from DAP and PAS have occupied every strategic spot in the town.

Hou said he has been going on walkabouts at night markets as well as meeting

Chinese and Malay associations.

At one such walkabout, almost all Chinese shoppers and hawkers interviewed expressed support for Pakatan. Indian voters were reluctant to reveal their political leanings.

DAP battle plan

In an interview with Malaysiakini and KiniTV, Liew described Hou as a nice guy but noted that the focus in this general election will be a contest of policy not personality.

The DAP has reinforced this message at its evening ceramahs, which have attracted thousands of Chinese.

The Kluang parliamentary constituency is surrounded by the Malay-majority parliamentary seats of Ayer Hitam, Sembrong and Simpang Renggam.

Ayer Hitam will see a contest between MCA Youth chief Wee Ka Siong and PAS Supporters Club head Hu Pang Chaw, the first non-Muslim candidate to contest on the Islamic party's ticket.

Johor PAS Youth chief Suhaizan Kaiat will go up against incumbent Liang Teck Meng from Gerakan in Simpang Renggam.

Putrajaya PKR division chief Onn Abu Bakar is to take on caretaker home minister Hishammuddin Hussein in Sembrong (left).

Liew said that grouping the four parliamentary seats as a single region could deliver better results.

"Elections are like that. (DAP parliamentary leader) Lim Kit Siang likes to say that the campaign determines half the electoral results.

"How we manage, respond to and strike during a campaign period will have a direct impact on the final outcome. Hence, we have this plan of linking the constituencies in central Johor."

A similar approach is being taken in southern Johor where there are six parliamentary seats - Kulai, Gelang Patah, Pulai, Tebrau, Johor Bahru and Pasir Gudang.

Another game changer, Liew said, is the rise of social media which is now playing a big role in breaking the information barrier especially among younger voters.

Although Lim had earlier listed 15 parliamentary constituencies as 'winnable seats', Liew believes that Pakatan will break through in eight to 10 seats.

And should Pakatan secure 10 seats respectively in Johor, Sabah and Sarawak, Liew added, Putrajaya will change hands.

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