

**Umno not contesting, but it holds sway in Batu Sapi**  
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Campaigning looks to be moving at different paces for the three parties contesting the Batu Sapi by-election, as voters give out mixed signals on who holds their favour going into the Nov 4 polls.

It's still early with six days of campaigning to go, but the preliminary reading is that the BN still holds sway as it defends the parliamentary seat for the fourth straight time since its creation in 1999.

It is, however, clear that despite their candidate, Linda Tsen Thau Lin, coming from Sabah-based component party PBS, the real bastion of support is Umno which has established a formidable core of supporters among the bumiputera grassroots.

NONETHis was obvious in bumiputera Muslim areas such as Kampung Istimewa in Karamunting, where over 200 hardcore supporters thronged the community hall to cheer on Tsen (at centre in long-sleeve shirt in photo) - at the behest of Chief Minister and Sabah Umno liaison committee chief Musa Aman.

And with local Umno leaders such as Sekong assemblyperson Samsudin Yahya tasked with mobilising support at the grassroots, early indications point towards steady support for the ruling coalition from the Muslim bumiputera community, which makes up some 60 percent of the Batu Sapi electorate.

azlanIt is unlikely that Tsen's campaign will be dented by persistent rumours of her poor command of Malay, as she is seen as having endeared herself to voters in areas she has so far visited by virtue of her softspoken and down-to-earth demeanour.

It also seems that she is getting a boost from the BN's constant portrayal of her resilience and strength of character in contesting the seat, held until a little over two weeks ago by her late husband Edmund Chong Ket Wah who died in a recent motorcycle accident.

At the same time, BN maintained its modus operandi of doling out goodies during the election season, so far having announced some RM6 million in allocations to various schools and organisations and for development projects, apart from the promise of swift completion of on-going projects such as the upgrading of the Batu Sapi road.

Tackling the tough crowd

SAPP on the other hand seems to be taking a less conventional approach to this fight, with its president and candidate for Batu Sapi, Yong Teck Lee, leading the charge into the heart of BN's support base - the Muslim bumiputera community.

And rather than presenting himself with pomp and ceremony, the charismatic former chief minister decided to lend a more personal touch by scaling down campaign visits to just 50 or 60 people at each stop, emphasising quality of delivery instead of drawing big crowds.

NONESitting on the floor to be level with his listeners, Yong (at foreground in white shirt in photo) continues to live up to his reputation of being a grassroots darling, something that could potentially be a big worry for the Umno machinery.

Party leaders have indicated that they may eventually hold large-scale rallies, though such events will be done towards the tailend of the campaigning period.

Yong admitted that the BN currently holds the edge in this contest, but pointed out that it also reminds him of the scenario faced by the one-time opposition PBS when it decided to go up against and eventually defeated Berjaya to take over Sabah in 1986.

He claimed during a press conference earlier today that the voters they have met so far, particularly the Chinese community, are "concerned we may lose" and want to help SAPP emerge the winners in this by-election.

True or otherwise, there doesn't look to be anything to show a dip in support for Yong among the Chinese, who are usually very keen to meet him and even ask to take pictures with him when he is out on his walkabouts.

Trailing behind the others

With the lines of support already drawn out between BN and SAPP, not much room is left for Sabah Pakatan Rakyat to manoeuvre its way into the hearts of Batu Sapi voters.

The decision to put up PKR's Ansari Abdullah as their candidate shows they are clearly gunning to break up Umno's monopoly on the Muslim bumiputera, while the party's Chinese leadership such as supreme council member Chua Jui Meng are working hard to win Chinese support.

But the task is doubly difficult for Sabah Pakatan, who are grossly outgunned in the machinery department when it comes to approaching the bumiputera community while they will have to destroy SAPP's credibility among the Chinese before they can even think of promoting themselves with that segment of voters.

NONThe situation is not helped by the fact that for the past few days, Pakatan's national leadership barely made a presence in Batu Sapi, save for a clutch of senior leaders such as Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail and PAS secretary-general Mustafa Ali on nomination day.

It is possible that PKR's top brass may be busy campaigning for its election of national leaders, which begins this weekend.

Whatever the young opposition coalition hopes to achieve from this outing, they need to first get their act together in what little time they have to spare or end up gaining nothing from either the bumiputera or the Chinese.