

All eyes on 'taiko' Yong Teck Lee
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COMMENT KUALA LUMPUR - All eyes are now on former Sabah chief minister Yong Teck Lee as he has been considered a possible Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) candidate for its first election foray as an opposition party since quitting Barisan Nasional (BN) last year.

Popularly known as "Sabah Taiko" by some within the Chinese community, the 52-year-old SAPP president has not ruled himself out as a candidate for the Batu Sapi by-election, saying he was now entitled to contest as the disqualification period due to an election offence had expired.

The other possible candidates from SAPP are party secretary-general Richard Yong and central liaison committee member for Karamunting, Poon Kee Yang.

Yong was disqualified in 2001 from contesting for five years due to a 1999 election billboard offence. When the disqualification was lifted in 2006, he stayed out of the 2008 general election after SAPP's request to be given the Kota Kinabalu parliamentary seat held by Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) was turned down by BN.

SAPP is scheduled to announce its candidate in Sandakan at the opening of the party's new office there this Saturday.

However, apart from BN, the party is set to face the PKR-DAP-PAS opposition pact or Pakatan Rakyat (PR) which had on Tuesday announced that they would be contesting the seat.

The contesting parties are expected to announce their candidates by this weekend before nomination next Tuesday, but the likely scenario of a three-cornered fight does not look good for SAPP.

"Frankly, this by-election is going to be between BN, SAPP and PR. For BN, they want to prove their might while SAPP and PR want to use it to gauge their respective positions for the next general election," said political analyst Rizal Zamani Idris.

Rizal, a lecturer at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), said a straight contest, with Yong as one of the candidates, would be a tough fight for BN.

"SAPP has yet to be tested (after it left BN). We don't really know its strength although Yong has been talking on numerous issues that are close to the hearts of Sabahans. If it's a three-cornered contest, BN will have an easy win because the opposition votes will be split," he said.

However, some analysts believe that SAPP is unlikely to field Yong as its candidate as the risk is just too high because if Yong loses, it may spell the end of the party.

This explains why BN actually prefers Yong and PR to contest as it will be to the ruling coalition's advantage. Some BN component parties are said to be eager to "crush" Yong in the by-election.

This explains why they want badly for him to contest in Batu Sapi.

"He has proclaimed himself as the hero for Sabah, campaigning 'Sabah for Sabahans'. Now he has to prove himself to the Sabahans.

If I can go to Sandakan to contest, he too can," said Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) president V.K.Liew.

Liew said should Yong decide not to contest and put another candidate, it would show that the veteran politician "is running away from facing the verdict from the people".

"Even if SAPP decides not to contest, or PR backs SAPP, it would prove that all this while they actually have a pact and have been working together.

Either way, it puts SAPP in a difficult spot to explain its position to the people," he said.

Whatever it is, some party insiders say both SAPP and PR decided to contest the Batu Sapi seat because they don't trust each other.

Some PR members believe that SAPP is the "Trojan horse" put up by BN to split the votes.

But party insiders point out that SAPP is actually making a strategic move to put itself in a better position to bargain for seats to be contested in the next general election.

SAPP has openly said it wants to contest 40 state seats in the next general election in order for them to form a new government in the state.

"Actually, SAPP is even prepared for a three- or four-cornered contest in Batu Sapi. The reason is simple; it wants to see how many votes it can garner and which among the opposition parties has more support," said a party insider.

However, for SAPP, whether Yong will be contesting or not, is not the main issue.

As pointed out by party deputy president Eric Majimbun, SAPP needs to contest the Batu Sapi seat as it is a Sabah-based party.

"The question is not whether we can win or not, and whether we will be slaughtered or not, but about support for us.

"If we don't contest in Batu Sapi, where else? We cannot go to Sarawak or Semenanjung (Peninsular Malaysia) to contest.

"Sabah is the only place where we can," he said. - Bernama

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