

**Bumburing, Lajim switch deepens seats rivalry among Sabah opposition**  
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**By Clara Chooi**

KUALA LUMPUR, July 30 — Last weekend's decision by two Barisan Nasional (BN) lawmakers in Sabah to back Pakatan Rakyat (PR) has intensified the tussle for seats among the federal opposition even as it seeks to loosen the ruling coalition's hold over the East Malaysian state in the general election expected soon.

The Malaysian Insider understands that PR and the local Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) are already close to brokering a power-sharing deal but Tuaran MP Datuk Seri Wilfred Bumburing's and Beaufort MP Datuk Seri Lajim Ukin's sudden entry into the game so close to the polls may throw a spanner in the works for the state's colourful opposition front.

When announcing his departure from BN over the weekend, Lajim, a federal deputy minister, also stated his intention to field his men in 17 of the state's 25 parliamentary seats in the coming election.

But this may clash with the PR-SAPP power-sharing deal, which SAPP president Datuk Yong Teck Lee told The Malaysian Insider today included an agreement that would see the peninsula-based PR taking on a larger share of the state's federal seats.

The former Sabah chief minister, however, dismissed this as an "internal issue" for PR to resolve among its three component parties of DAP, PKR and PAS.

"The principle here — and this is the basis that we have been discussing for the last three years — is that SAPP takes on more state seats and the federal parties take on more federal seats. It has more or less been crystallised now," Yong told The Malaysian Insider when contacted.

"I think this whole Lajim-Bumburing situation... they are basically internal PKR and Pakatan issues.

"But with SAPP, yes, yes, we are making our agreements... even yesterday, PR leaders told us that talks between SAPP and PKR will progress further," he said.

The experienced politician pointed out that both Lajim and Bumburing would be contesting under PKR's flag, saying this further indicated that the negotiation should not affect PR and SAPP's deal.

When asked if SAPP would be willing to back down should either Lajim or Bumburing push to field their choice of candidates in a greater share of seats, Yong said this was not part of the opposition's agenda.

"Only in the stage of fine-tuning... because Lajim's base is Beaufort and Bumburing's in Tuaran. The fine-tuning (of candidates) will only be in these areas," he said.

Yong's SAPP has been pushing hard for its emotive "Sabah for Sabahans" agenda, which it says means that administrative control over the state known as the "Land below the wind" must remain in the hands of a local party.

During a March interview with The Malaysian Insider, SAPP leaders said the opposition front's seat-sharing formula must entail Sabah parties contesting in two-thirds of the state's 60 state seats while PR takes on two-thirds of the federal seats.

This, they said, is a win-win formula that would enable all parties to achieve their goals in addition to toppling BN.

Another opposition party, STAR (State Reform Party), led by 65-year-old political veteran Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan, is also singing the same tune but The Malaysian Insider understands that its seat negotiation with PR has yet to be resolved.

While SAPP's Yong admitted that STAR has local advantage in some of Sabah's interiors, a local PR leader revealed that the newly-formed political front may contest against PR during the polls.

When contacted here, Sabah DAP chief Jimmy Wong said the party was willing to be "flexible" in seat negotiation, despite noting that DAP has its sights set on fielding candidates in 20 of the state's 60 state seats.

"We have new shareholders now — Lajim and Bumburing. So we should all give a little, take a little.

"To me, the important thing is the BN wall... the great war in Sabah is about breaking the BN 'fixed deposit', about toppling this BN wall, which we now see cracks appearing in," he said.

Sabah PKR chief Ahmad Thamrin Jaini told The Malaysian Insider that PR parties would have to meet again at the negotiation table to accommodate its new allies.

"We need to observe, of course, their strength in their areas and our strengths. It is about the bigger picture here.

"Of course, anything affecting the seats that we have agreed should be given to us in PR... it should require renegotiation," he said.

Federal seats in east Malaysia's Sabah and Sarawak are expected to be BN's focal point come the general election as both states, including the federal territory of Labuan, contribute a significant 57 seats, or 25 per cent of the 222 Parliamentary seats available.

In Election 2008, BN lost its customary two-thirds parliamentary majority largely due to significant losses in the peninsula, where it won just 85 seats while the opposition swept 80 seats.

BN's saving grace was in Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan where the coalition trounced the opposition and made a near-clean sweep, winning 55 parliamentary seats to the opposition's two.

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