



Buffaloes in the Wild East of Batu Sapi



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Nov 4, 10
11:38am

ANALYSIS Voting has begun here in Batu Sapi, and it is an open contest. From the onset of this three-cornered fight, the BN has had the advantage, with SAPP stalwart Yong Teck Lee seen as the dark horse while PKR's Ansari Abdullah a distant underdog.



However, as the campaign progressed, Pakatan Rakyat has gained some momentum and able to split the traditional bases of the other two candidates.

The final Pakatan ceramah last night of 2,000-strong signals a partial awakening. Whether this will translate into needed support remains unclear, as many voters are torn between the two opposition parties.

A high turnout will make the contest even more competitive and a closer race as voters decide among three stark choices:

- a) Rewarding BN
- b) Signaling Sabahan's independence, or
- c) Opting for creating a national upset

All three choices cannot be ruled out.

This parliamentary constituency has benefitted tremendously from the high palm oil prices. From my last visit here four years ago, there is a noticeable increase in incomes. While this comparative vibrancy has not yet fully translated into adequate improvements in infrastructure – as many roads remain unpaved – the mood in this distant constituency is upbeat.

The size of the middle-class has grown, although poverty – especially among the new

citizens from the Philippines – is widespread and appalling as poverty has been imported. Crucial will be the impact of the 'gifts' – which apparently include even computers for children's education.

Voters here know that any non-BN result in Batu Sapi will signal change, both at the state and national levels.

Batu Sapi is part of Malaysia's 'Wild East'. It is not quite as wild as Tawau, but there is a sense of frontierism, as the ethnic diversity reflects greater openness. Sabah has - more than any state - opted for new alternatives, voting in opposition actors (often the same people under different political umbrellas) on at least three occasions. The proximity of this area to the Philippines reinforces its sense of openness.



Voters are torn between embracing different levels of familiarity, and their concerns with these choices. They are also torn between acknowledging the gains – even short term – provided by the BN, or opting for the possibility of marginalisation from potential development projects.

The BN has promised a school, a hospital, a new road and more as part of its efforts to woo the electorate. The question is then how 'wild' are the Batu Sapi voters and which buffalo (forgive the literal referent) will they support?

PBS: The stable buffalo

The BN is relying on a desire for stability and pragmatism, as its campaigning has built on a well-trying model of development promises, goodies and economic gains. It has centred on the BN label.



Its candidate, Linda Tsen, is a highly capable person, but has been particularly challenged in working the ground, especially among the poor. It is not just a matter of her command of the language, but also her exposure and familiarity. All acknowledge that she has not connected well to the locals, especially in some of the Malay kampungs.

Her husband, however, was respected and liked, as he was a man of integrity who had a history of quietly resolving issues and taking stands on key issues such as the coal plant and the distribution of citizenship, and this will work in her favour.

He was as a strong advocate for an independent Sandakan, and for a casino. Due to the trauma she has faced, Linda Tsen was sheltered during the campaign, as the focus has been on asking for a vote for BN driven by state leaders. Even Prime Minister Najib Razak and other BN national leaders have not been in the forefront, unlike the contest in Sibu six months ago.

Batu Sapi is primarily a contest for Sabah BN. The stakes are high for the Umno state leadership. This contest involves the future of Chief Minister Musa Aman. A victory is an endorsement of his leadership, and a resolution of many of the questions involving his economic management of resources.

Efforts have apparently been made to mend fences with contenders in Sabah Umno and former Usno leaders to assure that the sabotage factor is minimised. Any split among the Malay vote will open the way for other contenders.

SAPP: The proud independent buffalo

The contest at the state leadership is being played out with even more intensity with the Yong candidacy. This contest is about the future of SAPP and Yong.

Will he be made into the Sabah political kingmaker – and possibly hold the balance of national power in his hands – or will be forced to regroup and mend fences with either BN or Pakatan? His support, among Chinese voters especially, is considerable, and SAPP has its loyalists.

Batu Sapi is more home ground to SAPP than any of the three parties contesting, especially in Karamunting. The connection of SAPP to local patrons in some of the villages cannot be underestimated. The strategy to tap into local sentiment and the desire for Sabah to set its own path distinct from the national agenda should not be underestimated. The voters in this 'wild east' want their independence and are proud of their own identity.



For SAPP, the decisive issues will be the level of support from the Chinese, who comprise 38 percent of the electorate, and among the estimated 5,000 new citizens from the Philippines, who have migrated to Malaysia in the last few years.

Many of these individuals came to Malaysia when Yong was in power. These two groups will shape Yong's chances – and determine how the opposition in Sabah will evolve. No question, SAPP knows that its political future is at stake, and at the state level, SAPP is seen as the strongest competition to BN and as such, there is a particular desire to wipe them off the political stage.

PKR: The young buffalo

Despite falling down a few times, PKR candidate Ansari Abdullah and Pakatan have managed to find their footing. The campaign for the underdog started slowly, with the posters only coming four days into the campaign period.

The momentum for PKR has been steady. Ansari has built on his connections in the local communities in his capacity as a lawyer and there has been a concerted effort to woo Chinese voters by appealing to their power to shape the national stage.

There has been a concerted effort to mend the rifts within Pakatan here, although disgruntlement remains. The focus,



however, has been on convincing voters in Batu Sapi of their potential national power, appealing to the risk-taking that is part and parcel of this frontier town.

It is thus no surprise that PKR leader Anwar Ibrahim has planted himself here for four days. He prioritised this contest over a meeting with the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, as it is clear that gains here for Pakatan and PKR point directly to the future of the party in Sabah and nationally. If PKR manages to beat the odds or even come close, it is a new national picture.

In many ways, this contest revisits the dynamic in the months after March 2008 when Sabah became the battleground for national power and Pakatan fell flat on its September 16 takeover.

It still is critical nationally and this is why Batu Sapi is so important. This message of shaping the national direction has only started to sink in, and appears not quite as strong as it was in Sibu. It is a challenge to change the orientation of voters from 'East' to 'West' Malaysia.

Race to the finish

Whether the young, proud or stable buffalo will win remains uncertain. What will be important will be not just who is victorious, but the margin and ranking of different contenders. The respective positions will shape how these political actors will have to work together at both the state and national levels.

A close result will create a new terrain. At the same time, a large victory will profoundly shape the future of all concerned.

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