

‘Like’ it or not, social media makes its presence felt in Bt Batok by-election; Chee, Murali both using Facebook to garner support, but are voters paying attention?

Wong Pei Ting and Casandra Wong
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On paper, the Bukit Batok by-election began on April 27 when the People’s Action Party’s (PAP) Murali Pillai and the Singapore Democratic Party’s (SDP) Dr Chee Soon Juan emerged as the official candidates for the May 7 poll.

But the race between the two men started weeks earlier on social media, particularly on Facebook where both candidates have been posting a steady barrage of photos, videos and even “live” commentary.

Dr Chee, in fact, began his unofficial campaign less than 12 hours after the shock resignation of former Bukit Batok Member of Parliament David Ong on the afternoon of March 12, a Saturday.

The following morning, Dr Chee led an SDP team on a walkabout in the single member ward.

A video of this visit was posted about two hours later on his and the SDP’s Facebook pages, sparking speculation that the 53-year-old opposition veteran would contest the by-election.

Dr Chee went on to drop strong hints about his candidacy on Facebook, such as by posting photos of him visiting residents and taking part in a blood donation drive, before making his candidacy official on March 20.

Mr Murali, a lawyer who also contested in the 2015 General Election (GE) as part of the PAP’s losing Aljunied team, made his social media entrance much later on March 24, three days after he was announced as his party’s pick for the by-election.

Even though it was not clear at the time when the by-election would be held, Mr Murali, like Dr Chee, took to Facebook to raise his public profile and promote his campaign messages.

Both men have so far taken distinctively different approaches on social media.

Dr Chee, who has a far bigger online “fan base”, has primarily been using social media to boost the speed and immediacy of his engagement with potential voters.

Mr Murali has taken a more laidback approach, eschewing new features such as the ability to broadcast “live” on Facebook for videos and photos that help burnish his folksy appeal.

But the question remains: Will this flurry of activity on social media make any difference to Bukit Batok’s 25,727 eligible voters when they go to the polls on May 7?

UNCERTAIN IMPACT

The social media campaigns which the PAP and the opposition parties ran during GE2015 were considered far better than the ones they conducted in previous elections.

Yet a survey of 2,000 voters after last year's election by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found that social media had a smaller impact than many had assumed.

Mainstream media outlets, which more voters turned to and trusted, were considered to have played a larger role, experts pointed out.

In a recent interview, Dr Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow with the IPS, said that social media will again have a limited impact on the polls in Bukit Batok.

The post-GE 2015 survey had found that voters who relied heavily on social media to form a political opinion were not well represented in Bukit Batok constituency.

"How social media will influence the by-election is a question of segmentation, and the type of housing in a constituency is a strong indicator we use to signal the segments," said Dr Koh, adding that an overwhelming majority of residents (95.7 per cent) in Bukit Batok live in HDB flats.

Bukit Batok is also a mature estate where the average age of residents is older, said Dr Natalie Pang of the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

"The demographic is different in terms of age and education, as compared to a typical active Facebook user who's liking and commenting positively on Dr Chee's social media updates," she added.

Even Dr Chee has expressed some doubts about whether his efforts on social media would translate into votes.

"The reception has been very positive. The only thing is that if Bukit Batok residents are on it as well," he told TODAY during a recent walkabout. "I have no reason to believe that they are not, but still, you can't know social media as such."

The majority of Bukit Batok residents interviewed about their social media habits in the past week told TODAY they had not been actively seeking out Mr Murali's or Dr Chee's posts.

They added that they would base their voting decisions primarily on what they read on mainstream news outlets, and what they observe during the campaign period.

"I prefer not to use social media," said a Bukit Batok resident, who only wanted to be known as Mr Eng. "I prefer news. I don't think what they post on Facebook will affect my vote," added the 43-year-old, who works in the IT industry.

Ms Shalini Selliah, 29, a TV production manager who has lived in Bukit Batok all her life, said she does not follow any politicians on social media despite being a regular user of Facebook.

She added: "The current social media campaigns will not influence my voting decision in any way since I have already based my decision on overall impressions from the last General Election."

But Dr Chee and Mr Murali's messages on social media have not entirely fallen on deaf ears.

Some Bukit Batok residents, such as engineer Nor Mohammad Azmi, 35, said they are beginning to notice the two candidates' messages on Facebook, even though they are not actively looking for such content.

And even if older voters do not come into direct contact with the two candidates' social media campaigns, experts say there is the possibility that they may be influenced by their children or grandchildren, who are regular users of social media.

"Even though older adults do not participate or consume content on social media, they do get context from their children and grandchildren. This may sway them in their votes, depending on whether they talk to their families about politics," said Dr Pang.

HARD VERSUS SOFT APPROACH

For those who are keeping score of the two candidates' performance on social media, Dr Chee has the clear lead over Mr Murali. On Facebook, Dr Chee has over 47,000 "likes" compared to about 4,000 for Mr Murali.

Dr Chee's posts also typically attract more engagement from social media users, who go on to share or comment on his remarks.

This is not surprising, given the opposition candidate's greater experience and familiarity with social media.

Dr Chee, on average, puts out three posts a day, and regularly signs off with a hashtag of his campaign slogan "Now is the time".

He often uses his Facebook page to directly address criticisms from the PAP, promote his messages on key issues, or rally for donations and volunteers.

In comparison, Mr Murali, who did not have an official Facebook page in the last GE, has taken a more laidback, non-confrontational style in his social media campaign. The videos and photos that he posts on his Facebook page mostly depict him interacting with the estate's residents.

Dr Pang of NTU said both candidates have been taking the "right approach" in their social media strategy.

"Mr Murali has to get himself known as an individual, and his 'softer' approach focuses on making himself more personable. Introducing himself as 'Ah Mu' is quite interesting, because the estate is made of mainly older and Chinese-speaking residents," Dr Pang told TODAY.

Dr Chee's "harder" approach, on the other hand, is a natural progression from the social media playbook he adopted for GE 2015.

In that election, he turned to social media platforms to help shed the strident and adversarial image that he had been known for.

"In the last GE, Dr Chee has already portrayed himself as a personable candidate, with videos of his family going viral, so it's crucial for him to show what he can do for the estate as well as (in managing) the town council," added Dr Pang.