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Yong-Interview

CM ROTATION IS THE "MOTHER OF ALL PROMISES", SAYS YONG

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KOTA KINABALU, Sept 4 (Bernama) -- Sabah has seen 10 changes of chief minister since 1963 but when Datuk Yong Teck Lee took over from Datuk Salleh Said Keruak on May 28, it was an occasion of unique political proportions.

That was the day when the promise to rotate the chief executive of this politically-volatile state was fulfilled after a period of reservations and uncertainty.

Some called it a unique political "changing of the guard".

After his first 100 days in office, in an interview with Bernama, Yong described the promise made by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the run-up to the 1994 state election as "the mother of all promises", borrowing the famous phrase of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

He said so many promises had been made and kept over the years but they hardly captured the imagination or excited the people of Sabah as much as this one.

"This promise is very simple, that everyone in Sabah can understand and remember most. If this promise had not been fulfilled for any reason, people would have said "apa lagi?" (what do you expect?)," he said.

"The Barisan Nasional (BN) has made and fulfilled many promises, like the setting up of a university, the polytechnic, programme to eradicate poverty, build roads, schools and hospitals, but the one that people remembered best and the one which was hotly-debated was the one to rotate the chief minister's post. So this one is the mother of all promises," he said.

Yong, the Sabah Progressive Party (Sapp) president, believed that because the promise had been fulfilled, the people's confidence in the ability of BN fulfilling other promises has been boosted.

Sceptics of the rotation system had expressed worries about its implications for political stability but, on the other hand, not implementing it could have produced other political problems.

Yong fully understood the feelings of people who were opposed to the rotation system, but he said it was merely because many did not understand the rationale behind it.

"The rotation system is to bring goodness to the people. As for myself, it is just a continuation since it started with (former Chief Minister and now the Yang Dipertua Negeri) Tun Sakaran Dandai," he said.

He said the implementation of the system was necessary as it would create a culture of trust among the people and leaders in the state, thus bringing the people closer.

"It is necessary in order to show that under the BN, no community needs to fear another community. Previously, every time there is a change of Chief Minister from one race to another, it is to the disadvantage of the other races.

"It is our job to create trust and harmony among the people. When that has been achieved, there is no need for rotation.

"Hopefully, after one round of the rotation, we can really work together and everybody will be happy," he said.

Asked how it is like to be the Chief Minister of Sabah, he said: "I think the Chief Minister's seat in Sabah has always been hot. And I think it's still hot".

Many felt that the Chief Minister of Sabah is now no longer as powerful

as in the past after amendments to several state laws to transfer powers over forestry, land and mining matters, which were previously vested solely in the Chief Minister, to his state Cabinet.

To this, Yong said that even before the amendments, the Chief Minister should have brought certain matters to the Cabinet, especially relating to the award of huge tracts of timber and agriculture land.

But these powers had been abused, making it necessary to compulsorily transfer those powers to the Cabinet.

"Therefore, we have not actually reduced the power of the Chief Minister to run the state effectively or to do good things for the people. We only try to avoid a situation whereby the Chief Minister can abuse power," he said.

On what really struck him most about his job, he said, is the glaring necessity of getting people to work together.

"It is important to bring everybody in and use their strength and capability for each other...so that the sum total is bigger than the individual strength. This is something new that I discovered after I became Chief Minister."

He said that after going around the state for several weeks, he was shocked to learn that some BN divisional committees had not met for a long time until he visited the area.

"Not only the committees have not met, even leaders from the various parties have not met with each other since the last election. They are all on their own with no common agenda," he added.

Yong said he had also met and discussed with the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the private sector and associations whom he said had spent their own time, energy and even financial resources for the benefit of the state.

"They have to be recognised...once they feel that their contribution is appreciated, they will even be more encouraged and inspired to continue with their work," he said, describing it as a big step toward working together.

The slogan "Malaysia Boleh, Sabah Boleh" launched by the Prime Minister before the National Day celebration in Kota Kinabalu over the weekend could go along very well with his "art of getting people to work together".

But Yong said the slogan was more to cultivate self-confidence among the people in Sabah so that they would be open-minded, dare to take risk and embark on business.

Asked about his plans after his two-year term as Chief Minister under the rotation system, he said: "That is the least of my worries today. Chief Minister or no Chief Minister, there are so many things to do.

"I have worked in various capacities and portfolios. There are many ways we can continue to serve and contribute. Do not get into your head that once you are Minister or Chief Minister, you should always remain there.

"Once that gets into your head, you will get a big problem. I keep telling not only myself but all my fellow leaders, especially those in the Sapp, that your work and service is not limited only to your post.

"So I am not the least concerned about what to do after two years. Not many people believe me on that. They will have to wait for two years to see what I mean." -- BERNAMA

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