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Sabah-Amendments (Special Report)

SABAH SHOWS THE WAY TO MORE TRANSPARENT GOVT

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, June 6 (Bernama) -- Datuk Salleh Said Keruak, who stepped down as Sabah Chief Minister 10 days ago, had never been comfortable with the fact that the post is too powerful.

He once confided to friends that he was always reminding himself not to let the powers go to his head.

"This post is open to abuse because it is too powerful. You can't feel it until you get here," he told this writer last year.

It is Salleh's belief that curtailing those powers would be one of the most effective ways for him to deliver his promise to the Prime Minister of establishing a "real and open" government in Sabah, which had suffered years of economic slowdown due to political instability.

Before the Barisan Nasional (BN) took over from the Parti Bersatu Sabah government which collapsed soon after the 1994 state election, it was common for political party supporters to build personality cults around their leaders and chief ministers.

This side of Sabah politics gave rise to the politics of patronage, or locally known as timber politics, arising from the absolute powers the Chief Minister has to grant favours like timber concessions to whoever he wants.

In short, the Chief Minister can make a person a millionaire by the stroke of his pen.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad cited this example when he announced late last year that amendments would be made to the state constitution to transfer some of the powers of the Chief Minister in forestry, land and mining matters to the state Cabinet.

Given Salleh's own strong feelings about the need to trim the excessive powers, it is likely that he suggested the amendments.

This can be gauged from the Prime Minister's assertion that there are no plans yet to similarly curtail the powers of the chief executives of other states, which, according to some noted local constitutional lawyers, are basically as formidable as those of Sabah's in the three matters.

Dr Mahathir had, in his visits to Sabah since the BN took over the helm, underlined the importance for the state leadership not to let Sabah slip back to the "bad old days" of nepotism, cronyism and timber politics.

Yong said yesterday that curtailing the powers of the Chief Minister was necessary for the sake of good governance and, like Salleh, agreed that the powers as they stand now are excessive.

The amendments, expected to be passed by the State Legislative Assembly at its two-day sitting from June 17, will mean that the Chief Minister can no longer grant timber concessions and licences for related industries on his own accord.

Only the state Cabinet will have such powers.

The Chief Minister, who now is the only authority to order the alienation of state land, will also transfer this power to his Cabinet.

He must also obtain the approval of the Cabinet before alienating state land for mining purposes. Now he does not have to.

The almost absolute powers which the Chief Minister now exercises over the Sabah Foundation, considered as one of Sabah's cash cows, will also go.

With these amendments, Sabah is showing the way to a more transparent, real and accountable government, a trend which Salleh himself initiated and which Yong is now following through.

To allay public fears that the proposed changes would erode state rights, Yong has decided to make the bills on the amendments public before tabling them in the assembly. This is also unprecedented.

Sabah newspapers have started publishing in layman's language the important aspects of the bills with RTM to follow suit over the next few days through talk shows and other programmes.

Briefings will also be conducted for politicians, community leaders and government officers this weekend ahead of the assembly sitting.

As Yong puts it: "Once we explain and the people understand the amendments, they will see that their fears are unfounded. The amendments will in the long run benefit the people of Sabah themselves." -- BERNAMA

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