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Sabah-rotation (News Analysis)

THE PERILS OF UMNO ABDICATING SUPREMACY IN SABAH

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 5 (Bernama) -- When the Sabah Umno unanimously rejected the proposed rotation of the post of the state's chief minister, many people jumped to the conclusion that it was afraid of losing the post now held by Datuk Salleh Said Keruak.

Yet there are others who interpret it as a disrespect to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who made the promise to rotate the post among Sabah's three main communities.

But according to insiders who attended the Sabah Umno meeting on Jan 27 in Kota Kinabalu where it torpedoed the proposal, the concern expressed by Umno leaders in the state about the rotation had very little to do with not wanting to give up the post per se.

And the question of not respecting Dr Mahathir, who is Umno president, was farthest from their minds, with the insiders making it plain that Sabah Umno has nothing but the highest respect for the party boss.

They argue that this contentious issue -- given Sabah's potentially volatile political situation -- actually goes beyond the question of keeping a promise, which is what the whole thing is all about right now.

And the thing about rotating the post of chief minister is that it has never been done before, either in Malaysia or elsewhere.

Dr Mahathir, in a campaign speech during the 1994 Sabah election, had promised that leaders of BN component parties representing the three dominant racial groups -- Muslim Bumiputeras, non-Muslim Bumiputeras and Chinese -- would take turns to be chief minister if the BN won the state election.

To Dr Mahathir, a promise is a promise is a promise. And he has since the BN formed the state government, repeatedly said everytime he was asked about the subject by the media that the promise would be kept.

But the Prime Minister does also keep the door slightly ajar for what could be termed as a political concession or a softening of stand, political analysts said.

The first concession he made was that the promise would be kept unless the Sabah BN parties decided otherwise. And after the Umno Supreme Council meeting here over the weekend, Dr Mahathir, in what is seen as another concession, said he would meet the component party leaders separately before making a final decision on the issue which already has Sabahans on a cliff-hanging situation.

The Prime Minister is confident of settling the issue before March 17, the deadline which is being awaited with a countdown anxiety in Sabah itself.

For on March 17, Salleh of Umno is expected to hand over the chief ministership to Datuk Yong Teck Lee, president of the Chinese-based Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP), should the rotation be implemented.

Actually, most of the eight BN parties in Sabah have publicly rejected the rotation idea from the beginning. Only the SAPP and the Kadazan-based Parti Demokratik Rakyat Sabah (PDRS) are adopting the "neither yes nor no" attitude. Even the still influential Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), now in the opposition camp, is against it.

This is understandable because after Yong, the PDRS leader is to take his turn as the next chief minister until the term of the state government expires in 1999.

Now the point which the Sabah Umno is making by opposing the rotation

is that it raises the spectre of political instability once again in Sabah once Umno "abdicates" its current supremacy of the ruling BN coalition in the state, said party insiders.

There are many arguments to support their concern about Sabah's political stability once Umno is no longer at the helm of the state government.

People who visit Sabah these days can see a marked change -- it is most stable politically in more than a decade while business and investor confidence is at an all-time high.

The economy has turned around to catch up with the rest of the country after nine years of virtual stagnation under the PBS rule.

The political-patronage type of administration with too much power in the hands of the chief minister that has become a common feature in Sabah is done away with by Salleh, who vowed to create the most open and transparent government possible.

Tan Sri Dr Lin See Yan, one of Malaysia's foremost serving bankers, recently gave Salleh full marks for his stewardship of Sabah, judging by the feedback he obtained from businessmen, investors and potential investors in the resource-rich state.

Dr Lin, who served Bank Negara for 34 years, including over a decade as its Deputy Governor before retiring two years ago and who is now executive chairman of Pacific Bank, told Bernama that businessmen he talked to in Sabah were anxious to see the rotation issue resolved quickly.

"They are very comfortable with the open attitude of Salleh and the policies he has introduced. They are non-partisan but definitely want the present leadership to continue as it provides stability and a strong measure of certainty for which business thrives in," added Dr Lin.

Another BN partner which wants Salleh to continue beyond March 17 is the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) whose president Datuk Chong Kah Kiat, in an interview, declared: "All BN parties are equal but Umno is first among equals".

"This is the reality of Malaysian politics," said Chong, who is also Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, adding that he has been the most vocal about why Salleh should keep his job until the term of the state government ends.

To Chong and other Sabah politicians opposing the rotation, maintaining the political equilibrium in Sabah is no mean task but Umno has succeeded to do so in less than two years of heading the state government.

Umno leaders in Sabah also make no secret of their lack of confidence in Yong, the SAPP leader, as chief minister, given the high standards which Salleh himself set.

"One must also not forget a very important factor -- that Salleh was personally hand-picked by Dr Mahathir to be chief minister and everyone in Sabah can see how right the choice has been," said a senior politician who requested anonymity.

The need for Umno to maintain its supremacy in the Sabah Barisan Nasional equation by continuing to be at the helm of the state government for the sake of political stability and economic growth is thus seen as a far more crucial question in Sabah today than that of keeping a political promise. -- Bernama