

28 MAY 1996

Yong-Unique

YONG TAKES OVER IN UNIQUE POLITICAL "CHANGING OF GUARD"

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, May 28 (Bernama) -- When Datuk Yong Teck Lee took his oath of office as Sabah's new Chief Minister today, it was not just one of those many swearing-in ceremonies witnessed at the hallowed hall of the Istana in Kota Kinabalu since the state gained independence in 1963.

Today's ceremony is of far greater significance especially to the political development of Sabah than what the invited guests could perhaps discern at first glance.

It marked the first time not only in Malaysia but perhaps elsewhere in the world that a rotation system for the Chief Minister of a state has taken place.

Yong's appointment through this unique political "changing of the guard" system also puts to rest months of uncertainty over the controversial system, with political parties in Sabah divided over its feasibility and practicality.

By becoming the 10th Chief Minister, Sabah also created a record of sorts by having the most number of heads of government of any Malaysian state since independence.

While having the most number of Chief Ministers reflects the state's volatile politics, Yong's appointment could be seen as ushering in a new era of power sharing in the equally unique Barisan Nasional (BN) system of coalition government.

It was the brainchild of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who in the run-up to the state election in 1994 promised the voters that the leaders of the three main communities -- Muslim Bumiputera, Chinese and non-Muslim Bumiputera -- would take turns to be Chief Minister if the BN won the polls.

Although most of the BN parties in Sabah were initially opposed to the rotation system, Dr Mahathir's resolve to keep his promise was never in doubt, having repeatedly said that "a promise is a promise".

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

"We have to support the system because in the BN, we have to make sacrifices for the greater good of the state in the long run," Datuk Osu Sukam, a senior Sabah Umno politician, who is also federal Minister of Land and Cooperative Development, told Bernama today.

Also encouraging are reports that support for Yong as the new Chief Minister has been pouring in following his appointment, including by all the BN component parties, other organisations and former Chief Minister Datuk Harris Salleh.

Yong has taken over at the helm of this resource-rich state at a time when it is the most politically stable in years and with its economic growth registering very encouraging statistics, thanks to the leadership of his predecessor Datuk Salleh Said Keruak.

Salleh's hallmark has been the establishment of a "real and open" government, a promise which he made to Dr Mahathir when he was appointed Chief Minister in 1994, and which he delivered.

The challenge for Yong in the two years of his term is on the economic front and, as he said shortly after taking office today, to stay clear of political squabbles.

Yong told Bernama that he is giving priority to attracting investments

into Sabah not only from the established investing countries but to look towards the East Asean Growth Area (EAGA) which covers Sabah, Sarawak, southern Philippines, Indonesian Kalimantan and Brunei.

The most important reason for Yong's confidence is that he will have the backing of the federal government, an all too important condition for the Chief Minister of this "Land Below the Wind". -- BERNAMA

AU CTL