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Sabah political culture must change (HL)

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SANDAKAN, Sun. - The Government is determined to change the "old culture" of Sabah politics, even at the risk of facing defection by its State leaders.

"The Government is prepared to face this risk," acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said today, "in our determination to combat graft, irregularities and abuse of power among leaders."

He said the strong Government stance was to convey a clear signal to such leaders not to assume that because of their immense popularity, they could threaten the Government if action was to be taken against them.

"In fact, we are confident and we believe that we can muster enough popular support if we continue with this kind of action," he told a Press conference after meeting the Sabah Umno liaison committee at Renaissance Hotel.

Also present were committee chairman Datuk Osu Sukam, deputy chairman Datuk Abdul Ghapur Salleh and other party leaders.

Anwar earlier held a working lunch with the State Cabinet Ministers before opening the Libaran Umno divisional meeting at the Sandakan Community Hall.

He was also asked to elaborate on his hard-hitting speech on corruption at the Libaran Umno divisional meeting earlier and whether he conveyed the same message to the State Government and State Umno leaders in the two meetings.

Anwar said: "I emphasised the need to fight corruption...the time of giving warnings are over. Now is the time to take action. So, I asked for co-operation from the State Government and the party."

Anwar said he noticed several weaknesses (in the State Government machinery) and had directed that steps be taken to correct them.

The State Government's mandate, he added, was to help the people, many of whom were still poor.

"Financial regulations and awarding of contracts' procedures must be adhered to fully," he said. "The State Government has given its assurance on this."

"We do not want the previous political culture in Sabah where its leaders accumulated wealth while the interest of the people was neglected," he said. "We must ensure this is not repeated."

Anwar said a radical change in attitude was needed where leaders discharged their responsibilities, failing which the Government might lose popular support.

When asked whether his call for the Sabah people to support the Government's action against corruption was an indication that action against some Sabah leaders were imminent, he said it was more of a general appeal to the public, who he felt had expressed their support.

"Whether action will be taken," he said, "this will be decided by the Anti-Corruption Agency and the Attorney-General."

Earlier, when addressing a large gathering at the Libaran divisional meeting, Anwar said Umno's entry into Sabah was to champion the people's cause and not enrich a few leaders.

"That is why we do not want people to monopolise all the big projects for themselves, their families and friends," he said.

Anwar said action against corrupt leaders could damage the country's good image and reputation.

Noting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's worldwide fame for his contribution and vision as demonstrated by the various international awards he received, Anwar said: "With him showing such an exemplary leadership, how could we allow his good name to be smeared by a few corrupt leaders?"

Anwar said he had discussed on many occasions with Dr Mahathir the need to combat corruption, especially in Umno.

"We want Umno to be clean. Changes must be made within Umno first. The task is more crucial because the party is the pillar of the Government."

Stressing the importance of upholding a clean and responsible image of the Government, Anwar said this could be achieved if all leaders and their supporters adhere to regulations and use the correct channel to do things.

He advised Government supporters not to be easily taken in by offers of financial gains by their leaders.

"Remember, when one is bribed with RM10, the person giving the money could have already made RM1 million (through corrupt practices)," he said.

Reminding Umno leaders of their responsibility to serve the people, he told them "not to show your face only before elections and then forget about the people."

Commenting on the frequent blackouts in Sabah, Anwar said the Federal Government would assist the State to expedite the privatisation of Lembaga Letrik Sabah.

At its current capacity and resources, he said the LLS was unable to solve electricity supply woes there.

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