

# Sabahan thoughts turn

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THE coffee table at the lobby of the Sabah Legislative Assembly, normally laden with snacks for reporters and guests, was missing.

"Economy gawat, bah," state Finance Minister Datuk Osu Sukam joked, and invited reporters to the VIP room for coffee.

Without the lobby coffee corner for, the gossip centre moved to an unofficial smokers' corner along the washroom corridors.

Here, the politicians and their supporters made small talk. *Reformasi*, morality and economy were muted words sprinkled in their conversations with reporters.

Uppermost in their mind was the state polls as the 48-elected and six nominated assembly will be automatically dissolved when the Barisan Nasional government's five-year term ends on March 18.

In their chats, the Barisan assembly members tried to gauge how people perceived them, in comparison to opposition Parti Bersatu Sabah and Parti Bersekutu leaders.

Sabah Umno secretary Datuk Yahya Hussin wondered if Bersekutu's promise of bringing back Yayasan Sabah cash handouts of RM300 to everyone above 21 was enticing the voters.

"That one is a ploy, bah ... empty promises," he said, trying to convince reporters who told him that many people were registering for the cash payments which Bersekutu pledged to make if it won the next elections.

Inside the assembly, Osu, who is a Deputy Chief Minister, tabled his 1999 budget with a surplus of RM27.86mil although, if scrutinised carefully, it may end up being a deficit budget.

PBS president Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan was quick to see through it.

"Don't paint a rosy picture just because elections are close by," said the former Chief Minister, who knows well how budgets are jazzed up before any election.

The opposition assemblymen tried to score points by raising "tricky" questions, ranging from immigrants to asking when the list of privatised gov-

**The hottest topic in Sabah these days is the impending state elections as the Barisan Nasional state government's fiveyear term comes to an end on March 18. Lobbying for the 48 seats among the state's Barisan component parties has started as the polls draw nearer, writes MUGUNTAN VANAR and RUBEN SARIO.**

ernment agencies would be placed on public display.

The Barisan ministers gave terse replies, turning the tables on their opponents by bringing out PBS skeletons from its nine-year rule.

Both sides know only too well that the issues are raised to sway voters in the coming elections.

As the five-day budget debate wound up on Friday, several assemblymen left amid an air of uncertainty - some of them may not be returning to their chairs in the august house.

Speaker Datuk Hassan Alban Sandukong expected the budget session to be the last for the present government because the assembly would automatically dissolve after March 18.

He said if the Barisan did not call for elections before that date, it would become a caretaker government after that.

The polls will have to be held within 60 days, he added.

This Sunday, seat allocation is likely to be a main topic at the Sabah Barisan meeting so that the leaders will be ready to brief Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is to visit Sabah on Nov 27.

How Sabah Barisan's nine component parties - the single largest state coalition in the country - share the 48 seats will be a delicate juggling act for

any leader.

Now, Umno has 21 elected seats, Parti Demokratik Sabah 11, Sabah Progressive Party five, Parti Akar three, Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah two and MCA one. PBS holds four and one is held by an independent assemblyman.

Of the six nominated seats, two were allotted to Umno and one to SAPP. Three are held by PBS which won the Feb 18-19, 1994, state elections with a 25-seat simple majority but topped three weeks later by Barisan following a spate of defections.

Barisan's Liberal Democratic Party, Gerakan and MIC do not have any seats.

PDS president Tan Sri Bernard Dompok is the current Sabah Barisan chairman by virtue of his post as chief minister representing the non-Muslim bumiputra community under a two-year chief minister rotation system that saw a Muslim bumiputra and a Chinese representative serving the earlier two terms.

Dompok will have to appease both the Muslim and non-Muslim bumiputras as well as the Chinese-based parties if Barisan does not want its local power brokers to cross over to PBS or Bersekutu, led by former Parti Berjaya Chief Minister Datuk Harris Salleh

who is trying to make a comeback after quitting Umno early this year.

Since early this year, the Barisan leaders have been manoeuvring their parties into position in so-called "safe" seats where voters have even been told the names of possible individual party candidates.

A fortnight ago, Sabah Umno chairman Osu received the list of candidates proposed by Umno divisions but has not disclosed the number of seats sought by Umno.

PDS is said to be asking for up to 14 seats; SAPP six; LDP four; PBRs and Akar at least three seats each and MCA two. Gerakan and MIC seem not to be interested in lobbying for any seat this time.

Smiling though they may be to each other at meetings, some Barisan leaders are not seeing eye to eye as to which seats should be their parties'.

Datuk Yong Teck Lee's SAPP and Senator Datuk Chong Kah Kiat of LDP have been muscling into some of the six Chinese-dominated and three mixed constituencies by recruiting new members. MCA is hoping for two from the same lot.

Dompok's PDS and PBRs, led by Datuk Joseph Kurup, seem to have an unwritten understanding of dividing the Kadazandusun, Murut and Rungus community-dominated seats but they are elbowing each other in some areas.

Parti Akar president Datuk Pandikar Amin Mulia is squeezed not only between PDS and PBRs but Umno as well.

All in all, there are about 14 non-Muslim bumiputra community majority seats. Each party cites different voter composition figures to back up their claim to their favoured constituencies.

"They can give their views ... in the end they will have to respect the decision of the Barisan leadership," said Dompok, who fully understands that Dr Mahathir has the final say as to who gets what seat to contest.

Dompok also brushes aside as "hypothetical" the question of disgruntled Barisan power brokers jumping to PBS or Bersekutu, as had happened in previous elections.