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Appointment of Sabah's next CM may yet see a surprise

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to Sabah today is eagerly awaited by the people as the two-year term of Chief Minister Datuk Yong Teck Lee ends on May 27.

Dr Mahathir is scheduled to meet Barisan Nasional component party leaders at 2.30pm and is expected to discuss the appointment of the new Chief Minister before holding a Press conference at 5pm.

Some expect the Prime Minister to announce the next Chief Minister at the Press conference.

Under the third phase of the two-year rotation system agreed upon by State and Federal leaders, a non-Muslim Bumiputera is expected to take over as the 11th Chief Minister.

The rotation system was implemented when BN took over the State administration in March 1994.

It is unique in that the Chief Minister will be chosen for a two-year period each from among Muslim Bumiputeras, Chinese and non-Muslim Bumiputeras.

In contention for Chief Ministership are two prominent leaders - the Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Joseph Kurup, who is president of Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah, and Sabah Tourism and Environment Minister Tan Sri Bernard Dompok who heads Parti Demokratik Sabah.

Almost everyone in Sabah believes that the promise made in 1994 will be fulfilled and a non-Muslim Bumiputera will be appointed.

The speculations became more intense after both leaders met Dr Mahathir separately last week.

Although Sabah politicians do not completely rule out the possibility of a third candidate, they believe that either Kurup or Dompok, the two most senior personalities of Kadazandusun origin, would be made Chief Minister.

"We don't think Dr Mahathir will make any surprise announcement," said a close observer of Sabah politics.

He argues that the candidate should not only command the support of the majority but should also be capable enough to lead the BN into the next State election, which will be held by April next year when the current term of the State Assembly expires.

He will have to ensure that the BN retains power. Otherwise, the party will lose its credibility and he will lose one year of his two-year term as Chief Minister.

"Both Kurup and Dompok have good support from constituents. I cannot think of another candidate from among non-Muslim Bumiputeras who has as much support as these two," the observer said.

During his last visit to Sabah on Feb 19 and 20, Dr Mahathir said the next Chief Minister would be of Kadazandusun origin but not necessarily the current Deputy Chief Minister.

Currently, there are three Deputy Chief Ministers representing the three main communities. They are Datuk Abdul Ghapur Salleh (Muslim Bumiputera), Kurup (non-Muslim Bumiputera) and Datuk Tham Nyip Shen (Chinese).

Yong was a Deputy Chief Minister before he replaced Datuk Salleh Said as Chief Minister when the former's term ended in 1996.

Dr Mahathir said Yong's appointment was not necessarily a precedent for Deputy Chief Ministers to be automatically made Chief Minister.

When Tan Sri Sakaran Dandai (now Tun) was appointed the Yang di-Pertua of Sabah, it was quite obvious then that Datuk Salleh, who was Deputy

Chief Minister would be made Chief Minister. Speculations were less and restricted to some Umno members in Sabah.

Probably the most testing period was during the transition of power from Salleh to Yong in 1996, with some Umno members calling for the rotation system to be discontinued.

But Dr Mahathir, insisting that the election promise must be fulfilled, appointed Yong as Chief Minister, thus ensuring a smooth transition.

Some say that Kurup, as a senior member of the Government, has an edge over Dompok although PBRS has merely two seats in the State Assembly - including Kurup's.

The PDS headed by Dompok, on the other hand, has 11 seats in the State Assembly and is the second biggest party in the State.

If seen from the contributions made to the Kadazandusun community, then Dompok has the edge over Kurup because the former, it is said, has brought more development to the PDS constituencies than ever before.

But Kurup has always been a moderate leader and a strong advocate of consultative politics. Even as the then secretary-general of Parti Bersatu Sabah, an opposition party which governed Sabah, Kurup had distanced himself from the anti-Federal sentiment which was used as an election tool by its leaders.

As D-day draws closer, even the length of the two meetings which Dr Mahathir held with Kurup and Dompok is being considered.

Sources say that Dr Mahathir met Dompok for 40 minutes while his meeting with Kurup lasted 20 minutes.

It is said that it takes longer to console someone than to break a piece of good news.

The speculations have centred on Kurup and Dompok, with everyone giving little thought about the possibility of another candidate being chosen.

While all eyes are on Kurup and Dompok, one should also not rule out this possibility.

Little did anyone imagine that Datuk Abu Hassan Omar, then a Cabinet Minister, would be made Selangor Menteri Besar, a move which forced two by-elections.

Will Dr Mahathir spring another surprise?

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