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PBB-Contest

CHALLENGE FOR TOP POSTS EXPECTED AT PBB ASSEMBLY

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, July 12 (Bernama) -- For the first time in 12 years, the top posts in Sarawak's ruling Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), except that of the president, are expected to be contested at the party's convention to be held next month, sources said today.

PBB, the leading component party in the state Barisan Nasional coalition government, has not seen any challenge to its top leadership line-up since 1986.

In 1986, the party polls saw, among others, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha beating Agriculture Minister Datuk Amar Dr Sulaiman Daud for one of the two posts of Deputy President.

Since then, top posts like president, deputy presidents and vice-presidents have not been challenged at the convention held once in three years, in keeping with the need to maintain party unity, the sources said.

But this time around, the big fight at the convention on Aug 29-31 is expected to focus once again on Abang Abu Bakar, who is expected to be challenged by another party strongman, they said.

Abang Abu Bakar's position appears to be shaky because several of the party's divisions which have held their delegates' meetings so far in the run-up to the convention, have passed resolutions calling for his post to be contested.

The divisions include Asajaya, which is headed by Chief Minister and PBB president Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud and Pantai Damai headed by state Assistant Minister Datin Paduka Sharifah Mordiah Tuanku Fauzi.

"The move to 'topple' Abang Abu Bakar appears to be gaining support from other divisions but what is surprising is that even Sharifah Mordiah, who all this while is known to be a strong Abang Abu Bakar supporter, is a now joining the bandwagon opposing him," said one source.

They also noted the significance of the support for Abang Abu Bakar to be challenged coming from the PBB president's own division, describing this as "tantamount to a tacit support from Taib himself".

"It is indeed significant because in the 1986 convention, Taib openly supported Abang Abu Bakar in favour of Dr Sulaiman and this support enabled him to win," said the source, who interpreted the latest move as "Abang Abu Bakar having fallen out of favour with Taib".

Next month's convention has the makings of the most exciting party affair in many years and a few names have surfaced as possible candidates to take on Abang Abu Bakar.

The likely candidate is either Datuk Adenan Satem or Datuk Abang Johari Tun Openg, both incumbent vice-presidents.

The sources said Dr Sulaiman, the other vice-president, would stay out of the race for the No. 2 post this time.

Abang Abu Bakar is Deputy President representing the Muslim bumiputera faction of PBB with the other slot held by Tan Sri Alfred Jabu for the non-Muslim bumiputera faction.

Meanwhile, Abang Abu Bakar, arguably Malaysia's most low-profile minister, has refused to comment on the latest developments brewing within PBB.

"He will only do so when the time is right," an aide told Bernama.

But the candidate expected to challenge Abang Abu Bakar is likely to be

decided based on the number of nominations received close to the convention date.

Another crucial factor would be the card that would be played by Taib himself this time, said the sources.

As one political observer put it: "If Taib decides to support any one of the hopefuls, of course support could tilt for this candidate as seen in 1986. Well, if he decides to stay neutral, that would make the fight even more unpredictable."

Taib has on several occasions openly mentioned that he is grooming three party leaders -- Adenan, Abang Johari and Datuk Effendi Norwawi -- as a possible successor should he decide in the future to step down.

"The toss on Abang Abu Bakar's challenger is between Adenan and Abang Johari. Effendi is considered a long shot because he is more deeply involved in business than politics," said the observer.

Effendi, among other things, is the owner of Malaysia's latest private television channel, NTV7, that was launched on Tuesday by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

In a related development, another PBB leader who is little known outside Sarawak, Datuk Wahab Dollah, has of late emerged as a "dark-horse" seen as having more than an outside chance of taking on Abang Abu Bakar.

Wahab, besides being the PBB Information Chief and an Assistant Minister, is regarded by political circles in Sarawak as among the brightest up-and-coming politicians in the state and whose biggest asset is being Taib's closest protege.

A recent local news magazine article even referred to Wahab as Taib's "blue-eyed" boy.

Some party members contacted, however, said that the scenario of Wahab taking on the No. 2 post this soon was unlikely to happen "as he has still to learn the ropes in line with party tradition".

But yet there are others within the PBB ranks who did not rule out completely this possibility.

"In politics, nothing is impossible. Seniority is not the only factor for a leader to climb the party ladder. Of course any transition for a leadership change ideally would have to be a smooth one," said a source.

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