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Dompok's elevation a surprise for many

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NEWS that Tan Sri Bernard Giluk Dompok would be the next Chief Minister of Sabah raced through Kota Kinabalu town within hours of the announcement in Kuala Lumpur.

By evening, an oft-heard refrain was: "Of course, we knew it would be Dompok."

But the truth was, most people, including a number of those in the inner circle of Sabah politics, were caught offguard by the decision.

Up to a week ago, the hot favourite was still Datuk Joseph Kurup, the leader of Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRs).

And if one inquired why, one would be told in a mildly impatient tone that one, Kurup was already a Deputy Chief Minister; two, he had been the first to jump the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) ship for the Barisan Nasional lifeboat; and three, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad likes to stick to tradition in such matters.

A Sabah politician now says, somewhat sheepishly: "Difficult to know what PM is thinking."

The choice of Dompok over Kurup was, but, one of the surprises in the latest episode of Sabah's unique rotation-of-Chief Minister system.

The other was the remarkable lack of fuss or controversy with which the post passed from the incumbent, Datuk Yong Teck Lee, to Dompok.

There was, thankfully, none of the political twists and turns evident in the previous change-over - no foot-dragging, conspiratorial meetings, furtively taped discussions or secret plots.

The last change in Chief Minister saw political feelings run so high that even local journalists were affected. A group of them shaved their heads in a show of solidarity for outgoing Chief Minister Datuk Salleh Said; some of them ended up looking like pirates.

Things have been quite open this time around and Yong is said to have taken pains to ensure that the handover would not create anxiety or doubt.

In fact, when asked earlier on whether he would give notice prior to stepping down from the top post, he replied that notice was given two years ago. In other words, the Chief Minister's office is not personal-to-holder and under the present agreement, whoever occupies the seat does so on a two-year basis.

"It's a sign of maturity," says Sabah BN secretary Datuk Karim Bujang.

Yong, he says, had made it known that he wanted a smooth transfer and that is how it should be. It is, after all, only a change in leadership, not a change in government.

"His own experience when he took over ... he did not want the next person to go through the same thing. So, he has been very professional, even statesmanlike, and he has gained respect. To me, Yong is a role model for Sabah politicians," Karim adds.

And, of course, there is the satisfaction that an election pledge has been fulfilled.

The system of rotating the Chief Ministership between the Muslim Bumiputera, non-Muslim Bumiputera and Chinese communities was one of several campaign promises made during the keenly-fought 1994 State elections.

Two years on, even those who aren't too fond of him would grudgingly concede that Yong is not an easily-deterred man and he quickly took charge.

As Datuk Joe Leong noted in his recently-launched book on Yong, A New Beginning for Sabah: "Considering the strong objections to continuing with the rotation system by parties within Sabah BN itself during the preceding months of his appointment, Yong surprised his friends and foes alike by leaving an impressive and indeletable mark in the political history of Sabah.

"Some people had doubts that Yong could provide the leadership when he was appointed to hold the post after Tun Sakaran (Dandai) and Datuk Salleh. Most of them may have changed their opinions now."

Some say that Dompok has shown his gratitude by appointing Yong Minister in the Chief Minister's Department. Others say Yong is simply too useful to be left out of the Cabinet.

Everyone says now - on the benefit of hindsight, of course - that it would have been politically suicidal not to pick Dompok, a Kadazandusun leader who commands 10 Assemblymen in his Parti Demokratik Sabah (PDS).

Kurup, a Murut, has only one other Assemblyman in his party.

"It would be a total show of disrespect to the party with the greater number of Assemblymen," says one Kadazandusun professional.

And it would have provided fuel for the opposition, especially PBS.

Says Karim: "With representation from the Kadazandusun, nobody can claim that they are being shut out."

Dompok, on his part, comes across as a sober sort of politician.

He is serious-faced and has formal manners. According to one ministerial aide, he is also decisive, has a mind of his own and is "certainly more aggressive than Datuk Kurup".

For instance, following an NST report several months ago that speculation had placed Kurup as the more likely choice for Chief Minister, Dompok gathered a delegation from his party to seek a meeting with Dr Mahathir.

"He doesn't take things sitting down," says the same aide.

A property valuer by profession, Dompok has not been just sitting pretty in the BN Government either.

Several months ago, he managed to get Dr Mahathir to launch his think-tank, the Institute of Indigenous People Economic Progress. He is also behind the formation of the Kadazandusun Language Foundation and facilitated the setting up of the Kadazandusun Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

These grand-sounding schemes may not be bread-and-butter sort of projects but they appeal to the cultural heart of the Kadazandusun.

"He has seen how his predecessor moved. I'm sure he understands the BN concept ... one his first statements was that the Chief Minister is for all communities," says a government servant.

A local journalist says that despite Dompok's rather stern demeanour, he has no airs when it comes to the village population.

"I have seen him in rural areas. He has a very down-to-earth way with these people," says the journalist.

Dompok's political career had its seeds in the powerful Kadazandusun Cultural Association of which he was secretary-general.

A hint of the association's political significance: its president for the past decade has been none other than PBS president Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan.

He was also No 2 to Pairin in PBS, an indication of the trust and confidence that the older politician had in him and a Deputy Chief Minister under Pairin's administration.

Some BN people - notably non-Kadazandusun - have suggested that Dompok is the only Kadazandusun politician with the potential to match the appeal of Pairin.

"Com'on lah, Pairin is the huguan siou!" was the retort from Benedict Topin, current secretary-general of the Kadazandusun Cultural Association.

Dompok's 11-Assemblyman cross-over to the BN effectively swung the cliff-hanger outcome of the 1994 State polls to the BN's favour.

Many Kadazandusun still think that Dompok had no intention of abandoning Pairin. The story is that Dompok left PBS to form PDS with Pairin's blessing, the aim being to ensure that the Kadazandusun could be represented in the State Government.

Although Pairin reportedly changed his mind later, the account is that it was too late for Dompok to retrace his steps because his new party had been registered and public statements issued.

Nevertheless, relations between the two Kadazandusun leaders have not been the same since. Both men no longer socialise and are rarely seen at the same Kadazandusun functions.

Meanwhile, Dompok's smooth arrival at the Chief Minister's 28th floor office in the Sabah Foundation building should not be taken to assume that all will be smooth ahead of him.

For instance, Kurup is known to be deeply disappointed. He only issued a welcoming statement four days after Dompok's appointment was announced.

Then, earlier this week, the Sabah Times quoted Herman Luping, the well-known Sabah lawyer who is associated with Kurup, as saying that PBRS was unhappy Kurup was not the chosen one. The next day saw Kurup hold a Press conference during which he urged the lawyer to apologise to the BN.

In the case of Umno, Finance Minister Datuk Ghapur Salleh decided not to rejoin the Cabinet while Sabah chief Datuk Osu Sukam issued an ambivalent statement about the need for a well-run administration.

It would seem that the smooth transfer of duties from Yong to Dompok only serves to highlight that much work needs to be done within Sabah Umno.

PBS, on its part, released a typically gung-ho statement asking Dompok to prove his electoral strength before accepting the post.

Those who know Dompok have no doubt of his determination to use this opportunity to prove his calibre and sincerity. His drawback may be the brevity of time - State polls are due before February 1999.

The other drawback is the way Kadazandusun votes are expected to swing.

Joe Leong, in his book, confidently predicted a two-thirds majority win for the BN. PBS, his forecast goes, is likely to pick up 14 seats which most people expect to be at the expense of the Kadazandusun component of the BN.

The road ahead may not be all that smooth.

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