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High stakes in the contest for the number two post in PBB

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WHILE the bids by two Sarawak State Ministers for the deputy president's post of Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) in party polls on Saturday had stirred much interest, many are also wondering about the fate of Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha who is the incumbent.

This is because Abang Abu Bakar, the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, received only one nomination against 32 for Datuk Adenan Satem, the Minister of Agriculture and Food Industries, and 14, for Datuk Abang Johari Tun Openg, the Minister of Industrial Development.

And the two challengers, who are incumbent vice-presidents, together with corporate figure and State Assemblyman for Dalat Datuk Effendi Norwawi, had been mentioned by party president and Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, as second echelon leaders who are likely to succeed him.

What about Abang Abu Bakar, then?

Ahead of PBB - the main component party of the State Barisan Nasional - annual delegates' convention from Aug 28 to 30, some observers also wondered why no reasons had been given on the exclusion of Abang Abu Bakar as the potential successor.

The exclusion, however, irked his supporters who believed that PBB should stick to tradition on the matter of succession.

After all, Tun Abdul Rahman Yaakub had handed the top party post to Taib when the former stepped down as Chief Minister and party president in 1981. "Why deviate from the tradition?" asked one supporter.

At the simultaneous opening of meetings of five PBB divisions in Kuching on June 27, Taib was quoted by the Sarawak Tribune, as saying:

"Some may think it is wrong for me to have mentioned so early the names of possible candidates, but I did so in good faith and in the hope of grooming them for the takeover when the time comes."

Political analysts believe that Taib was probably sending an indirect signal to Abang Abu Bakar of the impending challenge.

Speaking at the joint opening of the meetings of three party divisions in Limbang on June 21, Taib was quoted by the Sarawak Tribune, as praising another vice-president and Federal Agriculture Minister Datuk Amar Dr Sulaiman Daud.

The newspaper quoted Taib as telling 1,500 party members that Dr Sulaiman had shown exemplary leadership and was sincere and trustworthy as well as "had never failed to put the party's interest above his personal political interest."

Taib had also described Adenan, Abang Johari and Effendi as having displayed "good comradeship" in the party.

Back in 1986, Abang Abu Bakar defeated Dr Sulaiman for the number two post, and had been returned unopposed since. What then forced the change of events this time around?

Political analysts believe that it has a lot to do with rumours of Umno's entry into Sarawak. The rumours started last year and Umno president Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad, and Taib declared then that the time had not come for Umno to enter Sarawak.

Somehow, the rumours were said to have put Abang Abu Bakar in an "unnecessarily" defensive position. Recently, Abang Abu Bakar was reported to have told his supporters that he was a victim of the vicious rumours - that his name was linked to Umno. He had, in fact, made several denials in

the past, not only to the PBB members and supporters, but also to reporters, saying: "Why should I leave PBB and bring Umno into Sarawak."

The rumours spread like wildfire. And, according to PBB insiders, it had reached the ears of the party's leadership. Despite the repeated denials, the rumours had strained Abang Abu Bakar's relationship with other party leaders. He even admitted privately to close supporters in Kuching recently that he was now seen as an "outsider" in the party.

His supporters were quick to point out that his proximity to Umno leaders was natural, as Umno is the biggest component party in BN.

To put things in perspective, since the merger of Parti Bumiputera - led by Tun Rahman - and Parti Pesaka - led by Tun Jugah Barieng - in Jan 9, 1973 to form PBB, the contest for the number two post has never generated as much interest as this.

The stakes are high. For, based on tradition, whoever holds the post, is likely to succeed Taib as the Chief Minister of Malaysia's largest State.

Victory will not be plain sailing, either. It was only last week that Abang Johari complained of "invisible hands with strong financial background" interfering in the contest. However, the complaint was quickly brushed aside by Taib, who said such interference was "non-existent."

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