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Post (News Analysis)

NEW SABAH CHIEF MINISTER: WILL IT BE KURUP OR DOMPOK?

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KOTA KINABALU, May 6 (Bernama) -- Sabah will see another change in the state leadership at the end of this month when a new Chief Minister is appointed from among non-Muslim Bumiputera leaders according to a rotation system mooted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

It will mark the start of the third phase of the system under which power is shared by the state's three major communities -- Muslim Bumiputera, Chinese and Non-Muslim Bumiputera. The system was introduced after the Barisan Nasional (BN) came to power in the state in March 1994, replacing Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS).

The general expectation is that the new Chief Minister will either be Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Joseph Kurup or State Tourism and Environment Minister Tan Sri Bernard Dompok.

Kurup is the president of Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS) and Dompok the president of Parti Demokratik Sabah (PDS). Both parties are components of the State BN.

The two leaders met Dr Mahathir, who is the BN chairman, separately last week, leading to intensive speculation about who would be appointed to the state's top post.

Local political observers believe that Dr Mahathir has already decided on his choice, and do not rule out a third person being given the job.

The general feeling, however, is that Dompok and Kurup have the edge over the other non-Muslim Bumiputera leaders.

Indeed, the rotation system has come under a lot of attention this time due to the presence of these two powerful non-Muslim Bumiputera leaders, both heading parties that champion the cause of the Kadazandusun community.

It is difficult to imagine any other leader being appointed to the top post, say the observers.

There was little speculation during the appointment of the first Chief Minister under the rotation system, because the state had Tun Sakaran Dandai, an experienced leader who is revered by the Muslim community.

When Sakaran was later appointed the Yang Dipertua Negeri, not much was speculated about his successor. The people expected the person to be from Umno and at that time Datuk Salleh Said was already the Deputy Chief Minister.

The rotation system was faced with some difficulties when it was the turn of a Chinese leader to head the state government, with many Umno supporters pressing for the system to be abolished.

There was, however, no dispute on who from among the Chinese leaders should be appointed to the post, as the Prime Minister had named Yong as Salleh's successor.

Now that the Muslim Bumiputera and Chinese leaders have had their turn, there is general agreement that the cycle must be allowed to complete with a non-Muslim Bumiputera being appointed as Chief Minister.

But who should it be? Both Dompok's and Kurup's supporters feel their leader is the right person to lead the state.

The plus factor for Kurup is that as the Deputy Chief Minister, he is more senior in the government although PBRS has only two representatives in the state assembly including himself.

Dompok's strength is in the position of PDS. It is the second largest party in the government with 11 assemblymen, and the party is seen to have contributed to the Kadazandusun community.

The PDS can claim credit for the introduction of Kadazandusun language in schools in Sabah and for the setting up of the Kadazandusun Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) and the Kadazandusun Language Foundation.

"But this cannot guarantee the success of the leader because other factors including the leader's background can also influence the decision making process," said a PBRS supporter.

Kurup has established good relations with the federal leaders even when he was a senior leader of the PBS between 1985 and 1994.

The PBS, meanwhile, feels that neither of the two Kadazandusun leaders in the BN are qualified to be appointed as the Chief Minister, and that its leader Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan is the best person to lead the state government.

Supporters of the two leaders are looking at every sign that may suggest who would get the job, even on how long each of their meetings with Dr Mahathir lasted.

A PDS source said that a PBRS leader told him that Dompok had a longer meeting with the Prime Minister and it could be a good indication that he was the choice for the hot seat.

This is because if the meeting was brief it could mean that the leader was not chosen as Dr Mahathir would only be telling him that he had made his decision and there was nothing much to discuss.

Others, however, say that a longer meeting could mean that the leader concerned was not selected and the Prime Minister took some time to explain the reason.

Whoever is selected, the power transfer this time is expected to be smooth because Yong has said he would step down when the time comes.

-- BERNAMA

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