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Old habits die hard in Sabah's political arena

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FOR many Sabah politicians, the round of "open house" festivities that will come with the end of Ramadan and the start of the Lunar New Year are expected to be more than just feasting and merry-making this year.

The events will quite likely be scrutinised for their political implications because Sabah politicians claim that State elections are on the horizon although, technically, the State Government still has more than a year of its mandate left.

And, as is usual preceding big political happenings, every prominent politician's word and deed is sifted and dissected for veiled meanings and possible significance.

It began as early as last Christmas. For instance, Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan's Christmas open house in Kota Kinabalu was noted for the large number of Umno politicians who came a-calling.

"Datuk Osu spent more than an hour at Pairin's house," says a local.

Datuk Osu Sukam is, of course, Sabah Umno liaison chief and Pairin, president of the opposition Parti Bersatu Sabah.

Accompanied by a delegation of local Umno leaders, Osu spent a convivial hour at Pairin's house but barely half-an-hour each at equivalent functions hosted by Tan Sri Bernard Dompok and Datuk Joseph Kurup, leaders of the two Kadazandusun component parties in the State Government.

The result of the above was rife speculation that PBS would soon be back in the BN fold. However, they are quick to add the qualifier: no way Pairin will be Chief Minister.

Indeed, the post of Chief Minister has returned as a topic of conversation.

When Datuk Yong Teck Lee's term ends on May 27, the office will rotate to a Kadazandusun. Although the rotation of the Chief Ministership has long ceased to be an issue, it does not mean that all parties are crazy about the arrangement.

And that may, perhaps, explain the studied emphasis with which former Chief Minister Datuk Salleh Said says: "The system has been implemented ... we will accept whoever our boss (Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) decides on."

Thus, the remaining question seems to be: which Kadazandusun leader?

It is a toss-up between PBS cross-overs, Kurup and Dompok.

Kurup heads the Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah and is Deputy Chief Minister and State Environment and Tourism Minister; Dompok chairs the Parti Demokratik Sabah and is the State Resource and Enterprise Minister.

Although PBRB has only two Assemblymen to its name - as opposed to 13 PDS Assemblymen - most people seem to have their money on Kurup.

The reason: he is already the Deputy Chief Minister and he was the first to come over from PBS.

In many ways, Sabah politics is still very much focused on the Chief Minister's post and its perceived worth.

For decades, Sabah's political culture has largely hinged on the immense powers and influence enjoyed by whoever holds the post.

It is something which Yong has spoken openly about right from the start of his term of office and which he has attempted to change it through legislative amendments and administrative style.

Yong, as well as his predecessor Salleh, also had to grapple with the task of running the nine-component party State Government "the BN way".

It has obviously not been easy if events in the past one month are any indication. Many politicians have yet to be weaned from the former way of getting things done or, for that matter, getting things.

Besides, many of those now sitting on the same side of the fence were, up to a few years ago, bitter political rivals, out to do one another in; but now, they are expected to trust and work with one another.

"It takes time ... some of our colleagues, intentionally or unintentionally, still have the old habits of Sabah politicians," says State BN secretary Datuk Karim Bujang who is also Assistant Finance Minister.

Karim was probably referring to the rather embarrassing and very public volley of words between key figures in the coalition.

Earlier this month, State Umno Youth chief Jemakhan Majid had launched a scathing attack on the Chief Minister over a controversial multi-million ringgit timber shares deal involving a State subsidiary and even went to the extent of asking the latter to resign.

For several weeks, it was like the bad old days again in Kota Kinabalu as coalition partners behaved like opposition foes.

The shares altercation happened close on the heels of another controversy: Sabah Umno deputy chairman Datuk Ghapur Salleh's attempt to resign his Government posts of Deputy Chief Minister and Finance Minister.

Quite interestingly, Jemakhan, a wealthy businessman whose father was a prominent politician under the Berjaya regime, played a central role in both although it was the opposition PBS who started the ball rolling on the shares issue.

Interpretation of these events was intriguing: a few saw it as a realignment of loyalties in anticipation of the change in Chief Minister; many imagined it to be a proxy fight between Sabah Umno's No 1 (Osu Sukam) and No 2 (Ghapur); others went so far as to view it as political manoeuvring ahead of the State elections.

"None of the above," says Karim, who insists it is all part of the teething problems of a BN partnership.

He is right in a very general sense.

It is no secret that a number of Sabah businessmen-politicians had expected "goodies" in return for loyalty to the coalition. Ghapur who is, after all, Finance Minister, was one of those from whom such "goodies" were expected.

According to an Umno Youth politician, Ghapur came under fire during the last State Umno convention for not having done enough to help the Malays.

"He is Finance Minister ... they expected contracts and projects from him," says the politician.

He was also said to have grown "too soft" and "too close" to Yong, allegations which Libaran MP Akbarkhan Abdulrahman dismiss as completely unfair because "Ghapur and Yong have to work as a team".

But the last straw for Ghapur came when Umno Youth criticised the senior leader for vacationing in the United States (an aide claims Ghapur was already abroad when the Government directive against holidaying abroad came about).

Ghapur, in his 50s and not exactly known for being sweet-tempered - he is often likened to the other legendary hot-head Datuk Harris Salleh - blew up, and that was when he decided to call it a day.

"The criticisms hurt him. He has put in a lot for Umno, he helped put Umno in Sabah," says Akbarkhan.

Osu's supporters meanwhile deny that their boss is involved in any way.

Besides, the Land and Co-operative Development Minister has told people it is "better to be a small fish in a big pond (Federal Minister) than a big fish in a small pond (Chief Minister)."

At the same time, more than a few people have noticed that he has, of late, been spending more time in the "small pond" than the "big pond".

The last couple of years have also seen the boyish-looking Minister establish a standing among the younger Umno set, particularly the Youth wing. Hence, rightly or wrongly, he has been associated with Jemakhan's actions.

In retrospect, Jemakhan's offensive appears to have gone against the grain because almost everywhere else, BN component parties are making it a point to avoid conflict and confrontation, to concentrate on the economic agenda.

Says Umno Youth executive secretary Saifuddin Nasution: "It's okay to play a watchdog role but in a constructive way ... and mindful of the overall BN interest."

But if Sabah politicians are still trying to get used to the BN way of doing things, its populace is said to have begun to see the advantages of stable ties between the State and Federal Governments.

"Good things have happened in Sabah under the BN ... schools, hospitals, development. People have been able to get on with their lives," says Kurup.

In the meantime, it is said that apart from politicians and those with political stakes, the average Sabah people remained largely unconcerned over the political turn of events.

"People are quite used to this. Politicians here, they tell you they will die in this party one day and the next day, they're on the other side," says a local.

In other words, it seems to be politics as usual, a rather risky state to be in given State elections are just round the corner.

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