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PBB unity seen emerging stronger despite battle for positions

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WHILE the focus on the three-day Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu convention beginning today is the contests for the top posts, the 673 delegates are also expected to give the party leadership a strong mandate to maintain political stability and steer Sarawak out of the economic downturn.

Although the delegates may touch on crucial issues and policies, they are, nevertheless, not expected to give party president and Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud any problems. There are no signs to indicate otherwise.

For the people of Sarawak, in general, the convention is seen as charting a new direction for the State to enter the next millennium. This is on the basis that PBB, being the senior partner in the State Barisan Nasional, decides on government policies affecting the State.

Based on the convention's theme of New reality is the basis of Vision 2020, the delegates are expected to endorse programmes and policies on helping the Federal Government provide training and educational facilities, create job opportunities, speed up the industrialisation process and open up more land (both State and Native Customary Rights) for commercial agriculture.

Taib, at the joint opening of Youth and Wanita wings on Wednesday, clearly stated that he wanted total support from all, including the Youth and Wanita delegates, for these programmes and policies.

To ensure that these programmes are successfully implemented, he indicated he might expand his Cabinet and create new ministries, including one taking charge of human resources development.

But the question being asked is: can the party stay together with the intense campaigning by candidates contesting the deputy president and vice-president posts?

When asked this by a reporter recently, Taib retorted: "You know how many times that question has been asked before?"

Taib did not think it would lead to disunity. Despite crises, like the one in 1987 in which many (former) party stalwarts, including former Chief Minister Tun Abdul Rahman Yaakub, went against him, PBB emerged stronger.

Political observers believe that PBB would come out stronger after the convention. "I don't see the likelihood of PBB breaking up. After all, the delegates and leaders are mature enough and know what they are doing," commented a former PBB veteran.

He also did not think that the losers would leave the party. "They love the party too much to do silly things," he added. Taib is expected to retain State Ministers who lose in the party election.

Among the State Ministers contesting are Agriculture and Food Industries Minister Datuk Adenan Satem (deputy president) and Industrial Development Minister Datuk Abang Johari Tun Abang Openg (deputy president) and Assistant Ministers Awang Tengah Ali Hasan (vice-president) and Dr Abang Rauf Abang Zen (vice-president).

The fate of Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Abang Abu Bakar as incumbent deputy president will also be decided in this convention. With just one nomination to his name, he is challenged by Adenan and Abang Johari.

The three are going for broke in the election. Both Adenan and Abang Johari declined to seek re-election for the vice-presidency.

Although Abang Abu Bakar's camp would like to think that the contest is far from over, political observers believe that the battle is actually between Adenan and Abang Johari. Both Adenan and Abang Johari have been named by Taib as his potential successor as Chief Minister and PBB president.

The supporters of the three candidates, it is learnt, are campaigning hard for their men.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will open the convention today.

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