

29/11/1998

Sabah parties all ready to move into election mode

Joceline Tan

DATUK Shafie Apdal is the Member of Parliament for Semporna, a coastal constituency on the far-flung eastern corner of Sabah.

It is as far away from the capital Kota Kinabalu - the political hotspot where most Sabah politicians live and carry on their business of politics - as you could get.

Even then, Shafie's visits back to this remote constituency of about 35,000 voters have for the last few months been met with the inevitable query: "When is (State) elections going to be?"

His constituents usually refuse to take an "I don't know" for an answer; he is, after all, Parliamentary Secretary to the Information Ministry and a member of the Umno supreme council, so he has to know.

"Sometimes I feel they are more eager than politicians," says Shafie.

This economics graduate had his first taste of politics in 1991 when his uncle Tan Sri Sakaran Dandai, former Chief Minister and current Sabah Yang di-Pertua Negeri, took him on as his political secretary. Four years later, he contested the general election and romped home with the biggest majority in the State.

And although it is largely the State Assemblymen whose adrenalin is rushing, the anticipation over the approaching polls has not left Shafie unaffected.

Like other Sabah politicians, he had looked eagerly to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's latest visit for further hints.

"The posters and banners are ready, the ceramah programmes drawn up, even the list of speakers ... just waiting for the word 'Go!'," says Shafie.

Even the chief opposition in the State sounds more than ready.

"We've been waiting for it since 1994," says Parti Bersatu Sabah deputy president Dr Maximus Ongkili.

Yet, Shafie probably speaks for the rest of his State counterparts when he adds: "We are ready but we're not so keen for it to take place right now."

Right now means the tight space of about three weeks before the Muslim fasting month begins; there is a general reluctance to run a political campaign during the Ramadan although it has been done before.

Besides, as Sabah writer Datuk Joseph Leong puts it: "They've waited more than a year for it to happen, what's a month more?"

Holding it off a little more would, for one, allow Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, the Kadazandusun Chief Minister since March this year, just that little more time to make the desired impact.

Besides, the weather has not been what one would describe as campaign-friendly: daily rains, gales and overcast skies.

Even Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRs), headed by Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Joseph Kurup, had to postpone its annual assembly this weekend as a result of poor weather.

But even if the politicians are psychologically tuned to hitting the campaign trail next rather than this year, the political talk and speculation go on without stop.

Almost every official event is seen as some form of campaigning and that includes the centennial celebrations for Beaufort on the west coast and the two-day cultural fest among the Lundaiyuh, a group native to Sipitang.

Dompok was present at both events. In fact, this former PBS leader who

left to form Parti Demokratik Sabah (PDS) after the 1994 polls, has told the State Barisan Nasional to be prepared for the elections "as if it is going to be held tomorrow".

The coming polls bear urgent implications for Dompok and a host of other politicians and their political parties.

As the Kadazandusun component of BN, Dompok's party has to prove that it can make a dent in the Kadazandusun support that normally sails wholesale to PBS. It is a tough responsibility that may end or prolong his own political future.

Umno politicians on their part are anxious to prove that the party, which made its entry in Sabah politics only in 1990, is here to stay.

More important, they want to prove that they can lead the BN to victory without having to depend on what is known locally as "katak assemblymen", that is cross-overs from other parties.

It would be terribly embarrassing for the people of Sabah, humiliating even, if disputing parties have to again camp outside the Istana to wait to be sworn in as Chief Minister.

PBS, on the other hand, is out to prove it is the one representing the Kadazandusuns. After all, PBS president Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan is not only their political leader, but as huguan siou, is also their cultural leader.

Some PBS leaders also see the coming elections as an opportunity to settle old scores, especially with those whom they feel betrayed the party by crossing over to the BN.

Thus, many of its leaders go around telling supporters: "Don't forget, yah?" while reminding the BN that it does not have much time left to fulfil the promises made during the last elections.

PBS is so confident in certain areas that Ongkili jokes: "Even if we put a buffalo there, it will win."

But many ordinary Kadazandusuns are in a dilemma. They are attracted to PBS but at the same time, do not want to be left out of the mainstream development which is what may happen if PBS continues to stay in the opposition.

Shafie had broached the subject of PBS rejoining the BN shortly after the last State elections.

He had then told Ongkili (they were schoolmates in Sabah College) as well as Pairin: "If you want to join, do it now because you don't get married after you have children. Not nice lah."

Shafie also insists that the political culture of Sabah has changed somewhat since the coming of Umno.

"I think Umno has brought greater stability to Sabah and the people appreciate that," he says.

His colleague, MP and State Assemblyman Datuk Salleh Said, says Umno has also brought a sense of Federal commitment to Sabah.

"Promises of development alone are insufficient. People want you to show real commitment, they like leaders they can see anytime ... they like to be able to call you on your handphone," says Salleh.

Of the 48 Assembly seats, Umno and PBS are said to be equally confident of romping home in at least 16 constituencies each - areas that are respectively Bumiputera-Muslim majority and Kadazandusun-majority.

Both the BN and PBS have a fair chance in another 16 seats where the population is more mixed.

"I think we are looking at a very simple majority for whoever wins," says a Sabah journalist.

But the winning side will be bolstered by an additional six appointed Assemblymen. An earlier proposal to amend the State Constitution to do away with the appointment system has quietly died off.

Incidentally, the thorn in Umno's side is not PBS but Bersekutu, the party now headed by former Chief Minister Datuk Harris Salleh.

Bersekutu does not have any real clout to win seats, but it has the damaging ability to split the Bumiputera-Muslim vote in areas where both the BN and PBS have an even chance.

PBS is aware of how this may work to its favour and has astutely refrained from attacking Harris or Bersekutu.

But says Shafie: "Harris used to be a big boat, but now, he's just a small sampan. The Sabah political scenario has changed a lot since he was the big man around here. People are more aware, more educated ... they can make comparisons."

He is also confident that 70 per cent of the Bumiputera-Muslim vote will go to Umno.

However, Bersekutu's grand election-oriented promises such as allocating RM300 per annum to every adult Sabahan have attracted the people's attention. It has also gone around in certain areas to "register" people for this hand-out scheme.

"Most people know it's easier said than done but it makes great propaganda, I suppose," says Leong.

A local journalist who has been following Harris' comeback with great interest says: "What he promises now, he should have done when he was in power. Why promise what you did not do when you could do it?"

Another factor to look out for is the Chinese vote. The Chinese who make up 22 per cent of the population are often the most shrewd and secretive about their political preferences.

They are regarded as the king-makers because they have no fixed loyalty and their votes go to the party whom they think can serve their particular interest.

This State elections will also have to face what is known as the Anwar Ibrahim issue. Anwar played a key part in pulling together Sabah Umno, particularly during the 1994 elections.

Some of them liked him for the simple reason that he remembered their names and joked with them "even though we are orang biasa".

But Shafie insists that "people here are pragmatic about politics and politicians" and, besides, the "survival instinct is very strong".

Already, BN politicians are wondering who will replace Anwar as the Federal clout this general election. Others who were seen as "Anwar's boys" now tell people they are actually "closer to Tun Daim (Zainuddin)".

The other worry among many politicians is where the candy will come from. Funds are in short supply everywhere and in Sabah you need lots and lots of it to run a campaign. In that sense, Pairin may not need to complain again of money being "thrown from helicopters and distributed in coffeeshops".

But Sabah politicians claim the majority of voters have already made up their minds. Only a portion - figures range from 20 to 30 per cent - are still undecided about who they will cast their votes for.

If that is the case, the sweat and tears (and money) that will flow during the election campaign will be largely aimed at wooing this small group of fence-sitters. Strange, but true - that's Sabah politics for you.

(END)