

25 NOV 1998
Sabah-Election (News Analysis)
SABAH POLLS - WHEN DOES THE GUESSING GAME END

By: Jackson Sawatan

KOTA KINABALU, Nov 25 (Bernama) -- For the umpteenth time talk of imminent dissolution of the Sabah State Legislative Assembly soon after last week's five-day session remained just at that -- mere speculation.

"The question is whether the state election will be this year or the next. If the assembly is dissolved this year, it will happen soonest," said an observer.

So the guessing game continues with several political figures suggesting that the best time to dissolve the assembly is within the fortnight should the government plan to call for the polls this year.

They argued that if the assembly is dissolved now, Sabah could avoid clashing the election with the peak of the monsoon forecast to be at end of next month.

When posed the question, Chief Minister Tan Sri Bernard Dompok merely hinted that it could be held any time from now until March 18 next year.

Nonetheless his acknowledgement of the BN having received a list of probable candidates from its component parties reinforced speculation that the polls would be held soon.

"This (the list) is only a proposed list. So far there has been no detailed discussions within the BN over whom to field in the coming election," he said.

Dompok maintained that the polls were still a long way to go and that last Sunday night's BN meeting did not discuss the dissolution of the assembly.

"Although we discussed the coming election it was not the main agenda. The meeting was not held to discuss the election," he said.

The last Sabah state election on Feb 18 and Feb 19, 1994 saw Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) winning 25 seats and the BN 23 seats for the 48-member assembly.

The PBS, however, lost their majority in the assembly about a month later when its assemblymen left en masse to join the BN or to form separate parties which later joined the BN.

The BN formed the state government on March 17 the same year, initiating the system of rotating Chief Minister among Sabah's three major ethnic groups -- the Muslim Bumiputera, the Chinese and Non-Muslim Bumiputera -- to lead the state government for two years each.

Umno Sabah liaison committee chairman Datuk Osu Sukam also stayed mum on the election poser saying that the state legislative assembly could be dissolved any time from now.

While some state government sources said they were expecting the assembly to be dissolved "shortly", the others non-committally said only the top leaders knew of the exact timing.

Some forecast that the assembly would be dissolved before Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad comes to Sabah for a two-day visit beginning Friday.

Dr Mahathir, who is BN chairman, is scheduled to launch the BN youth wing's election machinery and open the fourth congress of Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRs), one of the state BN components.

"I have been informed that BN component parties favour dissolution of the assembly this year," one source said.

That statement was based on the latest situation report giving the governing BN coalition a comfortable head start in terms of public support

notwithstanding claims by the opposition Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) that it was enjoying increasing support day by day.

-- Bernama