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Sabah-Politics

THE EVER CHANGING POLITICAL SCENARIO IN SABAH

Last of Two-Part Series

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KOTA KINABALU: Like in many past state elections, the complexity of politics in Sabah forbids easy prediction as to which particular party will emerge victorious, and the next election is no exception.

The return of former Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Harris Salleh to active politics has added another dimension to the scenario though his move is seen by most Barisan Nasional (BN) leaders as merely an attempt to split the Muslim votes which would only benefit the opposition Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS).

They also agreed that despite all the excitement and eagerness, Parti Barisan Rakyat Sabah Bersekutu (Bersekutu), used by Harris as the vehicle for his political comeback, would not win a single seat in the coming state poll.

They said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was right when he referred to Harris as nothing more than a "spoiler".

Sabah Umno Chief, Datuk Osu Sukam alleged that Harris' return to active politics is not to rescue the Muslims in Sabah as claimed, but is solely motivated by his ill-desire to bring down the BN government in the state.

In his latest series of campaign, Harris has claimed that BN and Umno are not acceptable to the people anymore, especially the Muslims, and "if Bersekutu does not contest in the coming election, the Muslims will give their mandate to the Christian-based PBS to return to power in the state".

PBS, led by Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan, used to be the ruling party in the state after beating the Harris-led Berjaya in 1985. However, it failed to stay on after the 1994 election after several of its elected assemblymen crossed over to Umno or set up their own parties and joined BN. Among them are Parti Demokratik Sabah (PDS), Parti Maju Sabah (SAPP) and Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS).

Osu who is also the Minister of Land and Cooperative Development said, Harris has miscalculated if he thought that Bersekutu could become a better alternative to BN.

"Its presence would only benefit PBS, especially in the 12 areas where the Muslim majority are below 60 percent. PBS would reap the benefit if Bersekutu manage to obtain 10 percent of the Muslim votes there," Osu said.

According to observers, PBS are earnestly watching the current developments and has begun to deploy its "ninja turtles" or party workers to conduct house to house campaigns in the areas where Muslim majority are negligible, like Kudat, Bengkoka, Kawang, Pantai Manis, Kuala Penyu, Sugut, Labuk and Kuamut.

On the other hand, said Osu, without Bersekutu's interference, BN could easily beat PBS in all Muslim-dominated areas and win some of the PBS-held constituencies.

BN currently controls 43 state seats, comprising 21 held by Umno, 11 PDS, five SAPP, three Akar Bersatu, two PBRS and one MCA. The PBS has only four seats while an independent, one.

Defending his moves, Harris said under the present political scenario, he is certain that most of the Muslim-dominated area would fall into the hand of PBS if Bersekutu did not come into the scene.

He claimed that Berserkutu has a good chance of winning the 27 Muslim-dominated seats and several Chinese or non-Muslim Bumiputera seats. Latest statistics show that the non-Muslim Bumiputera voters dominate 14 seats while the Chinese, seven.

However, Osu treated Harris' claim as nothing more than "his favourite old political gimmicks, because by nature Harris is always confident about everything of relevance to him. He had displayed similar over-confidence during the 1985 election but Berjaya was beaten by PBS".

"Then in 1990, Harris once again boasted that his Berjaya party was ready to kick out PBS...but again Berjaya failed to wrest a single seat and he himself was humiliated in Sipitang," recalled Osu.

The President of PDS Tan Sri Bernard Dompok claimed that the people of Sabah would not accept Harris anymore because "he had no more base in Sabah and the people now see him only as another passing moment in the history of Sabah".

"His re-appearance is also seasonal, during election time, and his track record shows that he was never consistent with what he preached," he said.

Dompok who is replacing Datuk Yong Teck Lee (SAPP President) as the new Chief Minister of Sabah at the end of this month under the rotation system among the three main ethnic groups, said Sabahans are now politically matured enough and will continue to support BN because of its vision which promises them a better future.

He also refuted Harris's claim that the Sabahans rejected the rotation system for the Chief Minister's post.

"It is an approach," says Dompok, "which entails that all Sabahans, irrespective of their race and religion, contribute towards achieving the vision of a New Sabah and simultaneously discard the old practice of 'the winner takes all'".

Osu is confident that the people would not fall for the "empty promises" made by Harris, including the revival of the RM300 annual dividends to all adult Sabahans from profits made by the Sabah Foundation, if Bersekutu wins the coming election.

According to Osu, the promise would remain unfulfilled even if Bersekutu wins the election because "there is no way that the foundation could find RM200 million every year to be distributed to the 700,000 adults in the state. The amount is simply beyond the foundation's means."

He explained that although Sabah Foundation is still a major timber concession-holder in the state, involving some one million acres, it cannot simply cut timber for export like before because it is bound by the felling and export quota imposed by the International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO).

Nevertheless, Osu said, Harris' return to active politics is "a blessing in disguise" because it would motivate BN leaders and supporters to work even harder, especially in correcting people's perception of BN and ensuring that it would continue to rule the state.

While acknowledging Harris' contribution to the state when he was the chief minister before, Osu felt that Harris' culture and way of thinking are no longer suited to the present environment.

"We talked about agro-base development way back in the 60s and industrial base in the 80s. But we are now in the IT (Information Technology) age.....surely the people now would not want Harris to take them back to where they were 30 years ago," he said, in reference to Harris' emphasis on agriculture as his priority if he succeeds in his endeavour to become the state chief executive once again. -- BERNAMA

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