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Sabah-Dompok (News Analysis)

ALL EYES ON DOMPOK "BLOWING THE WHISTLE"

By: Azman Ujang

KOTA KINABALU, Feb 11 (Bernama) -- Sabah is now gripped in a football stadium-like atmosphere with all eyes of the spectators on the referee blowing the whistle to end what has been a heart-stopping match.

The referee is Chief Minister Tan Sri Bernard Dompok who will have the final say on when to dissolve the State Legislative Assembly to pave the way for the much-awaited state election.

But as late as yesterday, Dompok was still keeping the date of dissolving the state "parliament" a secret.

Unlike a football referee, he could still afford a little bit of time because the term of the State Legislative Assembly only ends on March 18 and under the State Constitution, election must be held within 60 days of the dissolution.

But the flurry of national political big-wigs flying in and out of Sabah in the past week, led by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, all point to Dompok now looking at his watch and he could very well blow his whistle by the middle of this month at the latest.

When asked if the state Cabinet meeting he chaired here yesterday was the last before calling for fresh polls, Dompok remained tight-lipped.

" I will announce it when the time is ripe and it is up to the Election Commission to fix the election date ," was all he wanted to say on the matter.

Dompok, 49, is also in the spotlight for other reasons as well.

The BN government is going to the people this time with him in the driver's seat under a unique system of power-sharing not only in Malaysia but also in the world.

Dompok is Sabah's fifth Chief Minister in as many years, appointed last year in line with the BN's rotation system for leaders of the three main racial groups to become Chief Minister.

The Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) won the 1994 election with its president Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan appointed Chief Minister but the state government collapsed a month later with the defections of several state assemblymen to the BN.

But in a state where the people normally vote along communal or ethnic lines between the Muslim Bumiputeras and non-Muslim Bumiputeras and with the sizeable Chinese electorate tipping the scale for the winning party or group of parties, concern has been expressed about Dompok's own chances of retaining his seat in the coming polls.

According to local BN sources, such concern has even prompted Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself to offer Dompok a seat considered "safer" than the Moyog constituency, his traditional power base, this time around.

The power base equation for Dompok has changed since the 1994 election because he won in Moyog on a PBS ticket then but later formed the Parti Demokratik Sabah (PDS) to join the BN with 10 other newly-elected PBS state assemblymen that triggered the fall of the PBS government.

The concern is indeed justified because Moyog is one of the predominantly Kadazandusun constituencies that are PBS strongholds. In Sabah politics, it is taken for granted that PBS has the upper hand when it comes to Kadazandusun constituencies.

Dompok has admitted that Dr Mahathir wanted him to contest outside Moyog.

"I was born, raised and studied here (Moyog). Hence, Moyog is my place and it is not my wish to abandon the people of Moyog," he said.

Dompok said he had a big heart for the 22,000-odd electorate of Moyog and had already prepared the BN machinery in the area to ensure victory.

According to his Political Secretary Ignatius Malanjun, the Kadazandusun community in Moyog had undergone what he called a "mindset" change especially since Dompok, one of Moyog's sons, had gone up to hold such a high office as Sabah Chief Minister.

"They are proud of his achievements. Give the Kadazandusun some intelligence. They are not about to abandon him although he is now in the BN," Malanjun told Bernama at Dompok's operations room in the constituency on the fringes of the state capital.

Dompok, a Bachelor of Science graduate, had also been a Minister in the Prime Minister's Department previously.

Malanjun spoke with some authority because in the 1985 state election he stood as a candidate for the now-defunct Parti Pasok and won the Moyog seat, beating a minister in the then Parti Berjaya government, Datuk Conrad Mojuntin.

"I beat him easily and Conrad Mojuntin almost lost his deposit," he recalled. Candidates who poll less than one-eighth of the total votes cast in a particular constituency will have their deposit forfeited.

Malanjun said PDS was implementing various strategies to wrest the seat from the PBS in the election.

Dompok, who was appointed Chief Minister in May last year, is expected to be reappointed to head the state government if the BN retains power in the polls in order to complete his term under the rotation system.

Sabah is a football-crazy state and the pressure is on Dompok to end the suspense over when exactly he will call for Sabah's last election of the century.

-- BERNAMA

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