

06/02/1999

A guessing game that's keeping political parties on their toes

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SABAH Chief Minister Tan Sri Bernard Dompok has the date in mind but he is not telling.

He's not even hinting when the State Legislative Assembly will be dissolved to pave the way for State elections.

He will only say that the Sabah Barisan Nasional is "ever ready", that the State Government is already into "injury time" (its mandate ends on March 18) but the elections will not be held during the festive period.

But Dompok's monkish silence has become fodder for Opposition politicians to take a swipe at his "servile attitude" towards the Federal Government.

The Opposition was quick to point out that Dompok and other State BN Government leaders do not have the last say on important State matters.

They claim that Dompok needs approval from Kuala Lumpur before he can advise the Yang di-Pertua Negeri to dissolve the Assembly.

Leaders of Parti Bersatu Sabah and Barisan Rakyat Sabah Bersekutu have been telling the people that the State BN Government was at the mercy of the Federal Government.

The Opposition has also been claiming that the frequent visits of Federal leaders to Sabah was yet another indication of the central Government's efforts to chart the course of the State Government, perceiving this as a sign of the latter's weakness.

In dismissing these accusations, Dompok said it was not unusual for him and other State leaders to be in constant consultation with the Prime Minister and other Federal leaders.

"It's a norm as Sabah is ruled by the Barisan Nasional ... consultation is always for the better for the people and State interests," the Chief Minister said.

As Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said during his visit to Sabah last month, consultation between State and Federal leaders would be continued in order to bring progress and development to the State.

"The rapid development in Sabah since Barisan Nasional came to power in 1994 has been due to cordial working relationships as a result of constant consultation between State and Federal leaders," Abdullah said.

Abdullah is due to arrive on Monday for another visit to Sabah.

Dompok said as Chief Minister, he has every right to decide when to advise the Yang di-Pertua Negeri to dissolve the Assembly but in the BN spirit of consensus, he would consult the other component parties on selecting a suitable date.

Further, Dompok is also obliged to inform Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad of the proposed date.

This surely cannot be construed as "getting the green light" from Kuala Lumpur.

It must be noted that previous Chief Ministers, including PBS president Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan, did the same thing.

On Jan 10, 1994, when Pairin announced the dissolution of the Assembly, he told a Press conference that he had informed the Prime Minister.

"At the end of the day, the decision (when to dissolve the Assembly) still lies with the Chief Minister," Dompok said.

Dompok said the Opposition's claim that national leaders were the de facto decision-makers for the Sabah Government, was nothing more than a

political gimmick.

Dompok, who is Parti Demokratik Sabah president, said the dissolution would not be announced by the Prime Minister during the latter's three days working visit to Sabah from Feb 18.

While in Sabah, Dr Mahathir will open the Sabah BN's third congress, themed "Together We Build Our Future" on Feb 20. He will also tour the Interior Division.

Sabah BN secretary Datuk Karim Bujang said one of issues to be discussed at the congress was the preparations for the State elections. Leaders of the nine BN component member parties in Sabah will be attending the congress.

Until the announcement is made, all are free to make predictions.

The speculation is a healthy sign that political parties and the 726,690 voters are well-prepared for the polls.

The forthcoming elections will be the ninth since Sabah gained independence through Malaysia in September 1963.

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