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Sabah-Peter

FIRST CHINESE CM LOOKS BACK AT SABAH'S POLITICS

By: Eddy Lok

KOTA KINABALU, Feb 18 (Bernama) -- For Tan Sri Peter Lo, watching the colourful political dramas of Sabah over the past three decades has been like walking down an endless memory lane.

Lo, now 74, was the first Chinese to have been appointed chief minister of this politically-weary state in early 1965, just over a year after it gained Independence through the formation of Malaysia.

But unlike four other former chief ministers who are in the fray for the coming state election, Lo considers himself too old to be involved in politics.

Watching and taking an interest in politics is okay to the man the federal leaders had put as chief minister on Jan 1 1965 at a time when the Sabah was besieged by a severe political crisis as then first Chief Minister Donald Stephens (later Tun Fuad Stephens) and Tun Datu Mustapha Harun, the first governor, were embroiled in a bitter tussle for political power.

"It is everybody's duty to take an interest in politics and affairs of Sabah lest we blame others for what happens later," he told Bernama at his home at Tanjung Aru here.

"I think whatever happens, as responsible citizens, we must all take an interest in politics ... we just can't blame the government for instance, if anything goes wrong ... I don't know how the ex-CMs think," said Lo, who was chief minister until May 1967.

Former Chief Minister Datuk Harris Salleh, 68, is leading Parti Bersekutu as a main contender in the ninth state election, intending to contest all 48 seats in the Legislative Assembly.

Another former Chief Minister, Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan, who heads the Kadazandusun-based PBS, is attempting to make a comeback to power he lost in the aftermath of the 1994 state elections through massive defections of his assemblymen.

Unlike Harris and Pairin, the other two former chief ministers who are contesting the polls are Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) President Datuk Yong Teck Lee and Datuk Salleh Said Keruak, both relatively young, and who became chief ministers under the rotation system introduced by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The rotation was thought to be the solution to the traditional political rivalry mainly between the Muslim and the Kadazandusun communities and a desire by the federal leadership to ensure power is shared among the major groups in Sabah.

Lo jokingly boasted that he served as chief minister much longer than some who had held the position, although he never endeared himself to many including the British who were still very much in control of the administration of Sabah then.

"I was chief minister for about two and a half years till May 1967 which was longer than those who have held the post under the current rotation system," he quipped.

"I don't think they thought of me as being a Chinese when I was asked to take over as Chief Minister. There was this political crisis that needed to be overcome," said Lo, adding that he was close to then prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and his deputy Tun Abdul Razak.

"Feelings in Sabah were running high and the situation was very volatile when I took over. The locals were very fond of the British after

about 100 years of their administration ... so obviously, some were happy and some unhappy," he recalled.

Timber politics and British preference for Stephens to retain political power through the office of the chief Minister and the challenge from Tun Mustapha had forced the federal government to cajole Lo, then a Minister without Portfolio in the federal Cabinet to take up the chief ministership. He was the first Sabahan to be in the federal Cabinet.

According to him, when Independence was achieved in 1963, there had been a tacit understanding between all parties that the governor would be a Muslim and a non-Muslim would get to become the chief minister but timber politics made this arrangement difficult and both Stephens and Tun Mustapha were unable to get along fine.

Stephens, who had earlier been prepared for the chief ministership by the British under the Members System, was CM even before Malaysia's formation.

But the British held real power by virtue of the fact that many of them were still district officers, permanent secretaries, the Conservator of Forests and Public Works Department Director.

Lo favoured nobody. He just wanted to help ease the crisis and keep things going as desired by the central leadership. There were intra-party difficulties in the SCA-Usno-Upko Alliance, the forerunner of the Barisan Nasional which draws membership from nine parties in Sabah today.

"Also, many of my boys were not happy with me because I did not give timber licences to them. Tun Mustapha was unhappy because I was too fair to all ... he didn't want me to be too good to Upko either," he said.

Lo said the mercurial nature of Sabah politics remains till today. The only certain thing is that nothing is certain, political observers used to say.

Real independence was only experienced in 1967 when the first state election was held, with the British banking heavily on Stephens but only to feel disappointed and bitter when things did not turn out the way they wanted it to be.

Lo himself lost the contest for the Elopura seat in Sandakan while the election saw Tun Mustapha who had quit as governor earlier, taking over as chief minister in February 1967.

Upko later was expelled from the Alliance and its members subsequently joined Usno. Today, the Kadazandusun communities are largely supportive of Pairin although in BN itself, several Kadazandusun parties exist to compete for support from among the native communities.

He underlines the importance and the need for a workable and amiable state-federal relationship any government of the day in Sabah must have as "we are all part of a federal system".

He said the various former chief ministers have their own reasons to be involved in the state election.

"Yong (the second Chinese to be CM) is still very much in control of the SAPP and involved in Sabah politics, so is Salleh. Pairin heads his own party and has his own objectives of being involved.

"Harris has said he would give the BN and Umno time to prove themselves and I am not surprised he is back in the arena. The previous CMs thought they could contribute something to Sabah's well-being. Asked what he thought the outcome of the coming election would be, Lo said: "If PBS and Bersekutu don't work together, they have no chance against the BN ... in any event, the BN is a very formidable political machine which is very well-oiled and run. The BN has been tested."

In his view, the people perceive Umno as a non-homegrown party but this disadvantage is quickly outweighed and overshadowed by the popularity of Dr Mahathir, the Umno President.

"This feeling is a very big drawback but fortunately for Umno, there is something which could tip the balance in favour of BN. We have a popular Prime Minister in Dr Mahathir.

He is fair and hardworking and people can see this is somebody above party politics, and when all chips are down, "I believe the PM will prove to be the winning card."

--BERNAMA

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