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Election-Kinabalu (News Focus)

KINABALU -- A NEW BEGINNING FOR THE KADAZANDUSUNS

By: Jackson Sawatan

RANAU, Nov 25 (Bernama) -- Henry Aling, 31, has lost count the number of times he has travelled along the road connecting this highland town and the state capital Kota Kinabalu, some 110km away.

Still, each time he passes the road along the Kundasang sub-district, he must catch a glimpse of majestic Mount Kinabalu, standing proudly 4,095m above sea level and the highest peak in Southeast Asia.

"The mountain never fails to captivate me each time. The sheer beauty, the mass of rocks, the waterfall almost a hundred metres high at the foot of the mountain, the highland trees surrounding it. It's simply captivating," he said.

If he is driving in his 1991 Proton Saga, he will switch off the air-conditioner upon reaching the vicinity of Kundasang and wind down the windows of the car so that he can feel the refreshing cool breeze.

These days however, the mountain is not the only reason many people throughout Sabah are focusing their attention on this district, which, according to the Kadazandusun folklore, is the community's place of origin.

The big thing happening in this area is none other than the political battle taking place between the Barisan Nasional (BN) and the opposition Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) for the Kinabalu parliamentary seat in the country's 10th general election on Monday.

The three-way battle there is interesting largely due to several factors, one being the choice of candidates while the other is the significance of the constituency to the future of the Kadazandusuns as a whole.

The BN candidate in Kinabalu is the United Pasok Momogun Kadazandusun Organisation (UPKO) president, Tan Sri Bernard Dompok while PBS is banking on its divisional chief Janimin Saliun to retain the seat.

Another candidate in the fray is independent aspirant, Wasimin Rashim.

The opposition is capitalising fully on Dompok moving away from his traditional Penampang seat.

To the opposition, the issue is none other than Dompok being an "outsider" but for UPKO and largely the Kadazandusuns, Dompok's candidacy in the constituency signifies a new political beginning for the community.

Drawing parallel from a Kadazandusun's folklore, a Kadazandusun teacher said the contest in Kinabalu symbolises "the second journey" for the community to seek a solid footing in the country's mainstream development.

"According to the folklore, our first journey started when our great great grandfather was asked to travel from the foot of Mount Kinabalu to seek fortune in various parts of this motherland. Still, the Kadazandusun of today has yet to find strong footing in the country," he said.

Notwithstanding the many successes achieved by the community, much still needs to be "journeyed", especially in politics, he argued.

"Politically, we are the ones who lost the most in the March state election. We voted heavily for PBS hoping to return the party to power...we were wrong. The great irony is, not only that PBS failed to return to power, we, in turn, lost what we already have at that time -- that is the strong representation in the BN government," he said.

Now with Dompok contesting in Kinabalu, the Kadazandusuns are looking at starting anew, politically, this time with an aim of getting the community to be among the major player in the country's economic development.

Kinabalu has 26,081 voters, mostly Kadazandusuns and is comprised of Ranau and Kundasang state constituencies. BN won Ranau while Kundasang went to PBS with a slim majority in the March state election.

A Dompok aide said campaigning was brisk in the area with opposition party resorting to attacking Dompok personally.

"They could not come up with a good issue to counter the calls by UPKO for the Kadazandusuns to unite and be in the mainstream," the aide said.

Dompok, however kept his cool, knowing that at the end of it all, what really mattered was the ability to bring changes and development into the area, which holds great promise as a premier tourist destination.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, during a brief visit here yesterday, said the time had come for the Kadazandusun community in Sabah to play a bigger role in the country's administration along with the other races.

He also said that PBS could no longer be depended on to represent them as the opposition party had merely been using racial sentiments all these while for the personal interests of their leaders.

"I urge Kadazandusuns to support and vote for their leaders in the BN in next Monday's general election to protect their interests," he said.

In politics, the Kadazandusuns, irrespective of their religions, have always been an important factor in Sabah especially in contributing towards the formation of a strong government.

Yet the community seemed not to have much say as far as their economic well-being is concerned.

Perhaps, they have not gone far enough as what their great great grandfather has asked them to do.

Perhaps the time has really come for the Kadazandusuns to start a new journey, not a physical one, but an attitudinal or mental journey to the pinnacle of the nation's economic development.

-- BERNAMA

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