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Sabah-Dompok

MANAGING SMOOTH POWER-SHARING MY BIGGEST CHALLENGE, SAYS DOMPOK

KOTA KINABALU, March 1 (Bernama) -- Tan Sri Bernard Dompok said today that managing the smooth process of power-sharing in Sabah has been his "biggest challenge" since becoming chief minister under the rotation system in May last year.

"As chief minister I have to ensure that power-sharing in the state Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition is working well and I think it is working well. This has been my biggest challenge," he told media editors over lunch here on the eve of nominations for the March 12 and 13 state election.

He said although Umno, which had 21 seats in the just-dissolved State Legislative Assembly, outnumbered other component parties including his own Parti Demokratik Sabah which had 11 seats, the party was not giving him much problems.

Answering a question, Dompok said it was true that his predecessor Datuk Yong Teck Lee was having "some problems" in handling Umno but this was because Sabah Umno had two heads at the time, Datuk Osu Sukam who was a federal minister in Kuala Lumpur and then Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Ghapur Salleh who was running day-to-day Umno in the state.

He disclosed that to minimise the problem, he urged Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to bring Osu home to Sabah and this was done only a month after he (Dompok) became chief minister, following Ghapur's surprise resignation.

He said another example that power-sharing was working well in the state was Umno agreeing to settle for 24 seats in the allocation of constituencies for the polls "although it had wanted more than 24 seats".

Of the 48 constituencies, Umno got 24, PDS 12, Sabah Progressive Party five, Akar two, Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah two, Liberal Democratic Party two and MCA one.

Dompok also said that contrary to opposition claims, there was little interference from Kuala Lumpur in the administration of the state government, except when it became necessary "when Dr Mahathir would act as the referee".

"He will blow the whistle when necessary but otherwise Kuala Lumpur has no reason to meddle in Sabah affairs," he added.

Citing another example of close state-federal ties, Dompok said the prime minister had actually wanted him to dissolve the State Legislative Assembly much earlier but he disagreed.

"Actually Dr Mahathir could have ordered me to dissolve it but he didn't. After listening to my reasons, he went along with with it," said Dompok who finally dissolved the assembly last Monday to make way for the polls.

Asked about the immense power that goes with the office of the chief minister in a state like Sabah with its vast natural resources, Dompok said it was a good thing that such unfettered powers were curbed by an amendment to the state constitution quite early after the BN government took over a few years ago.

"Otherwise, literally the chief minister can on his own approve hundreds of thousands of hectares of timber concessions to companies. Now such powers are vested not with the chief minister but with the state Cabinet.

"I am comfortable with this because it takes the burden of responsibility off one man to members of the entire Cabinet," he said.

At a speech later, Dompok welcomed both the local and international media to Sabah and wished them "happy reporting" during the election.

Describing the coming polls as "very interesting in which you all will have plenty of stories to write", the chief minister told them that he was sure that like in previous Sabah elections, there would not be a dull moment this time.

"Despite the economic woes the country is in, it provides for a very interesting election," he said.

His message to voters: "This is an opportunity for you to express support for the BN which is trying its best to develop Sabah for the sake of everybody so that no one would feel left out of the mainstream of development."

Asked how much money the BN parties would spend to run their election machinery, he quipped: "Because of the economic downturn, we will only spend within our means."

But he was quick to add that nothing would move without money and for this it would be very difficult to hold elections without a big budget.

Asked what the election meant for him personally, Dompok said: "This is the opportunity for me to lead the Sabah BN and it would be a proud moment in my life."

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