

02 MAR 1999

Sabah-Kadazandusun (News Analysis)
PBS OR PDS -- THE KADAZANDUSUN DILEMMA

By: Jackson Sawatan

KOTA KINABALU, March 2 (Bernama) -- It appears that the Kadazandusuns which make up over 50 per cent of Sabah's 2.2 million population are in a dilemma over a three-letter word in this election -- Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) or Parti Demokratik Sabah (PDS).

The March 12 and 13 polls is a way out of the dilemma for the community. It will determine if PDS led by Chief Minister Tan Sri Bernard Dompok could break PBS' position as the political standard-bearer of the community.

The Kadazandusuns are torn between their own indigenous two parties and choosing between the two would be inevitable.

For a long time PBS, led by former Chief Minister Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan was considered as "The Party" for the Kadazandusun until Dompok, then Pairin's deputy, defected to the BN following the 1994 state election. "There should not be any dilemma. The choice is clear... what the community needs is a clear policy in which Sabah is going and the party capable of doing that is the one that should be chosen," said Wilfred Tangau, the executive director of the Institute for Indigenous Economic Progress (INDEP) (Institut Kemajuan Ekonomi Anak Negeri), the community's very own think-tank.

Dompok himself says that although they may be a dilemma, what the community needs is a strong representation in the state government.

"If there is a dilemma, then PDS is here to offer an alternative," he said here yesterday, adding that PDS being in the BN fold the guarantees support from the federal government, offers the best alternative for the sake of their own future.

It is not that the other Kadazandusun-based BN component party, the Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS) headed by Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Joseph Kurup is "irrelevant" in the political equation. But politically speaking, the intense rivalry is seen as only between PBS and PDS.

PDS has been offering itself as the alternative since the collapse of PBS government in 1994 due to mass defections to the BN, but PBS insists that it still very much the voice and conscience of the community.

The intense rivalry is not surprising as their leaders have been going their separate ways although they once sit under the same roof.

While some see a dilemma is shaping up among the community, others beg to differ.

PDS' rise to significance among the Kadazandusuns, boosted especially by Dompok becoming chief minister last year, in some ways helped diminish PBS' position, say analysts.

The teaching of Kadazandusun language in schools, the formation of Kadazandusun Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Kadazandusun Language Foundation by the PDS, made the party a political force the community could not afford to ignore.

"The PDS has put the community's interest in a better position than during the nine-year PBS rule," says a Kadazandusun teacher.

If there is a dilemma, the analysts say, it may be due to the way PBS has been capitalising the "party-hopping" issue to gain voters' sympathy.

Labelling leaders who deserted the party as "political frogs", PBS in no uncertain terms called for the people to reject all its former leaders who are now in BN.

And they are out to settle the score with the defectors at the polls.

Pairin himself sees fighting PDS in the election with its leader as chief minister as no "big deal because Sabah has already had five chief ministers in the last five years.

PBS, which toppled the BN state government in 1985, was returned to power in 1994 but Pairin had to quit as chief minister three weeks later when the party lost its majority due to the defections.

Subsequently Sabah saw four chief ministers come and go under the rotation system mooted by prime minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

But according to PDS, Pairin himself was involved in the party's formation to ensure adequate representation for the Kadazandusuns and the other non-Muslim Bumiputeras in the succeeding BN government.

Pairin, in a desperate attempt to salvage the sinking PBS boat, tried to dissolve the State Legislative Assembly on March 13 but failed to get the consent from the then Yang Dipertua Negeri Tun Said Keruak.

Sensing trouble ahead, a meeting of PBS leaders was held with one ultimate purpose -- to find ways so that the Kadazandusuns can be represented in the BN government and since the PBS was unacceptable to BN, they have to form a new Kadazandusun-based party which would later apply to join the BN.

And the party was PDS, a name, according to Dompok, which Pairin himself had admitted as having a good "Feng Shui" (geomancy).

PDS was registered on March 21, 1994, four days after the collapse of PBS. PDS, with 11 assemblymen, was admitted as BN component parties on June 11 the same year making it the second biggest party in the BN after Umno which had 21 seats.

Now, it would be the moment of truth for the community as they decide, once and for all, the party of their choice with the new millennium staring at them in the face.

Analysts say the community cannot not afford a split when deciding which party to champion their cause.

"They should not, for instance, be seen as undecided over who should be representing them. If, say, half of them vote for PBS and the other half for PDS, they would risk losing the bargaining power in the Sabah political arena."

Says PDS outgoing assemblyman for Kiulu: "We have to regroup to fight the battle in the state election. If we are united, half of the battle is won."

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