

15/03/1999

Question mark over identity of next Chief Minister

Rashid Yusof

DESPAIR at Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan's residence, disbelief of Datuk Harris Salleh at his Parti Bersekutu's devastation at the polls and jubilation among Barisan Nasional supporters Saturday night, has been quickly overtaken by events.

By noon yesterday, as the impact of the conclusive State election began to sink, the question at the back of everybody's minds was who will be sworn in as Chief Minister today.

The whole poser is rooted in this scenario: the Chief Minister's slot is reserved for the leader of the Kadazandusuns under the ruling party's rotation system introduced after the 1994 polls.

But all its key figures in BN lost on Saturday in a backlash by Kadazandusun voters still fuming at the defections of 21 of Parti Bersatu Sabah assemblymen after the 1994 polls.

That Umno won all 24 seats it contested under the BN ticket adds to the complications.

Yet, this question will be resolved in a matter of hours with BN chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad making it clear that the rotation system would continue.

Ultimately, the debate will turn to the big-picture scenario: whether the State election will usher political stability which has been elusive.

Sabah's fluid politics had produced too many surprises, twists and U-turns with each episode having far-reaching repercussions.

For instance, only five of the 20 former PBS assemblymen who contested under BN tickets retained their seats. The rest, including State BN chairman Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, were voted out.

Dompok's loss to PBS's Datuk Clarence Bongkos Malakun came despite last-minute appeals by campaigners for Moyog voters to "vote with their head and not heart", meaning it would be pointless to reject a sitting Chief Minister from the Kadazandusun community.

While the polls produced a clear-cut winner, it also raised the question of whether there was adequate representation of the big Kadazandusun community in the new Government.

Of the 31 BN assemblymen, only three are Kadazandusun leaders - Umno's Rubin Balang (Kemabong), Parti Demokratik Sabah secretary-general Datuk Wences Anggang (Kuala Penyu) and PDS information chief Datuk Siringan Gubat.

This happened despite securing 46.3 per cent of the popular vote. The BN was shunned by a sizeable number of Kadazandusun voters who might well be the biggest losers in this election.

An Umno official alluded yesterday to the fact that Wences had actually won in a Muslim constituency, said to be the seat offered to Dompok.

Despite the lack of Kadazandusun representation which can be overcome by appointing nominated assemblymen, the new BN Government, with just one seat short of the two-thirds majority, cannot be held to ransom by dissatisfied voters.

This had been a concern expressed by Dr Mahathir when pushing for a big majority during campaigning.

Meanwhile, the Opposition Parti Bersatu Sabah of Pairin is expected to start focusing on the general election where parliamentary seats would be contested, secure with the knowledge that they continue to be backed by the Kadazandusun community.

This backdrop led some observers to be adventurous yesterday.

They wondered whether it was possible for an eventual BN tie-up with PBS, which still finished strongly with 17 seats, for the general election. At least this would guarantee BN of winning the 20 seats in Sabah.

A coalition Government is unlikely at this juncture. Dr Mahathir had said the door back to BN is shut to the PBS which bolted from the ruling coalition in 1990.

In this context, a strong strand accentuated by this State election is the superiority of the BN in its present form, along with the PBS, over all the rest.

Harris Salleh's Bersekutu, for instance, suffered a bruising defeat while PAS and Parti Setia fared poorly. Even the splinter parties of PBS now in BN are staring at a bleak future.

They include Akar which lost both seats it contested and Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah of Datuk Joseph Kurup who lost in Bingkor to Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan.

In the meantime, until Press time last night, events continued to unfold.

Dompok, for instance, was addressing a big crowd which gathered at his house.

The vanquished Chief Minister was urged to reconsider his decision to quit politics, following the ultimatum he gave during campaigning that he would retire if voted out in Moyog.

Also yesterday, even the smallest of details were drawing attention as the guessing game on who will be Chief Minister developed.

One was why Sabah Umno chief Datuk Osu Sukam went with Dompok to see the Yang di-Pertua Negeri Tun Sakaran Dandai at the Istana.

It was still good that Dompok still retained his sense of humour despite his loss.

When quizzed for the reason for his Istana trip by reporters, he said: "I went to inform him (Sakaran) of the official results ... in case he did not switch on the television last night."

(END)