

25 JAN 1999

Sabah-Election (News Focus)

SABAH IN FOR ANOTHER SPECTACULAR ELECTION

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KOTA KINABALU, Jan 25 (Bernama) -- Consider this: Sabah has had five chief ministers in as many years, beating even Japan which customarily changes its prime minister every other year.

Election fever has once again gripped this "wild west" of Malaysian politics and with parties already drawing their battle lines, the stage is set for yet another spectacular state election.

The state government is expected to be dissolved any time now and the spectre has been raised with Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi making an "important" three-day visit here from Jan 28.

To begin with, there's been a whopping increase in the number of registered voters in the state for the coming polls to 727,137 from 598,312 in the 1994 election, prompting some opposition leaders to question about the "sudden surge" in the state's adult population.

In fact, there has not been a boring moment for Sabah politics since the last state election on Feb 18-19 1994, having witnessed the appointment of five Chief Ministers -- Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan, Tan Sri Sakaran Dandai (now Tun), Datuk Salleh Said Keruak, Datuk Yong Teck Lee and now Tan Sri Bernard Dompok.

Pairin, the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) President, became the chief minister after the PBS won the last election by 25 seats against Barisan Nasional's (BN) 23 seats.

Pairin was, however, forced to resign a month later when his party lost the majority in the State Legislative Assembly when most of its assemblymen crossed over to BN, paving the way for a BN government to be formed on March 17 the same year.

The formation of the BN government also marked the implementation of a system to rotate the Chief Minister's post every two years among three major communities in Sabah -- the Muslim Bumiputera, Chinese and non-Muslim Bumiputera, a unique feature in Malaysian politics.

Sakaran was made the new Chief Minister in the BN government, representing Muslim Bumiputera, only to be replaced by Datuk Salleh Said Keruak about nine months later when Sakaran was appointed the Yang Dipertua Negeri.

In May 1996 the Sabah political scenario witnessed the implementation of the first phase of the system when Datuk Yong Teck Lee, representing the Chinese community, was appointed to the post.

But the transfer of power from Salleh to Yong was no smooth-sailig as it was met with resistance among some quarters not in favour of the system but Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad stuck to his word, that "a promise is a promise" and it must be fulfilled.

In May last year, Dompok, the Parti Demokratik Sabah (PDS) President representing the Kadazandusun community, replaced Yong, thus ending weeks of speculation over who would be appointed to the post -- Dompok or Datuk Joseph Kurup, another senior Kadazandusun leader in the BN government.

Sceptics had their field day criticising the unique system, which was a promise made by Dr Mahathir during the run-up to the 1994 state election.

BN fiercely defended the system, saying it has created stability and the culture of trust among the various races in Sabah.

But PBS, and later Parti Bersekutu, describe the system as impractical and vow to scrap it if they win the election.

"The system has failed to work the way it was intended," said former

Chief Minister Datuk Harris Salleh, who now leads Parti Bersekutu.

PBS, on the other hand, argues that the system is unconstitutional as it allows for the appointment of a chief minister among leaders not necessarily from a party that commands the majority in the legislature.

But the BN rejects this notion, saying that its leaders who have been appointed chief minister have been from within the coalition which has the majority in the State Legislative Assembly.

On the contrary, not implementing the rotational system could also lead to many other political problems especially when the opposition parties are harping on issues relating to promises made by the BN to the Sabah people, say some BN leaders.

"Although the BN has made and fulfilled many promises like the setting up of a university, polytechnic, programme to eradicate poverty, build roads, schools and hospitals, the one the people remember best is the rotation system," says Yong, who describes it as the "mother of all promises." Yong, the SAPP President, is now the Minister in the Chief Minister's Department.

By now, the BN is believed to have finalised its list of candidates with several new faces, especially from Umno.

PBS, still smarting from the mass defection of its assemblymen which led to the party's downfall after the 1994 election, is also finalising candidates whose "loyalty to the party is certain" while Parti Bersekutu is reported to have finalised candidates for over 30 constituencies out of the 48 constituencies it plans to contest.

While the PBS' strength appears to remain intact, political analysts say the BN looks favourite to win the election and to lead Sabah into the new millenium.

They say Sabah has witnessed a lot more stable situation since the BN took over the government and this is one-up for the ruling coalition.

The analysts argue that another factor in the BN's favour is the new electoral boundary, with the number of constituencies dominated by non-Muslim Bumiputeras being reduced to only 12 seats now as compared to 23 seats in the old electoral map.

PBS won all the 23 non-Muslim Bumiputera seats and two Muslim-dominated seats in the last polls.

There are 24 Muslim-dominated constituencies under the new boundary from 17 seats in 1994. There are also four Chinese-dominated areas and eight mixed-areas in the new boundaries compared to five and three respectively in the old boundaries.

"BN will win the election outright," Dompok who is Sabah BN chairman said confidently.

PBS' plans to unseat the BN are well-known but the party's willingness to work with the BN if it fails to win on its own steam, has added drama to the state's warming political climate.

On the other hand, Parti Bersekutu in no uncertain terms, has made known its ambitious development plans, as if it is sure of victory.

The term of the current 48-member State Legislative Assembly ends on March 18.

Of the 48 seats, BN now holds 43 seat while PBS four and one Independent.

Out of the BN's 43 seats, Umno had 21, PDS (11), five SAPP, three Akar, two Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS) and one MCA. BN and PBS also had three nominated assemblymen each.

Come what may, Sabah's last election of the century is all set to be perhaps the best remembered in its history.

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