

15 FEB 1999

LEAD Mahathir-Sabah

SABAH'S CM'S POST WILL CONTINUE TO BE ROTATED, SAYS PM

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 15 (Bernama) -- The Barisan Nasional (BN) will continue its system of rotating the Sabah chief minister's post among the state's major ethnic groups if it retains the people's mandate in the coming polls, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The system would be continued because it had proved successful, he told reporters at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah International Airport in Subang near here upon his return from the G15 Summit in Jamaica.

He said this when asked whether the rotation system will be continued if the BN retains the people's mandate in the state election, scheduled to be held any time now.

Expressing his confidence that the BN will win the election, Dr Mahathir said the rotation was necessary as the BN found that the various communities in Sabah lacked strength individually to win a majority and govern the state.

He said that since the BN's strength was derived from the three major ethnic groups, the BN was prepared to allow them to play a role in ruling the state.

Asked regarding the effectiveness of the system since the BN governs Sabah four-and-a-half years ago, Dr Mahathir said: "It is very good...what I see is that the people of Sabah accepted it. Of course, initially, there was some unhappiness but eventually it worked and nobody can say it hasn't worked."

Dr Mahathir, who will make a visit to Sabah on Thursday, said that since the state was governed under the system, the situation in Sabah had improved and was not like before.

He said that when the BN first took over the administration in Sabah after the last election, Sabah was then very backward, without street lights, and Kota Kinabalu looked like a town in a "least developed state."

However, he said, changes were brought about by the government under the system.

The rotation system was introduced when the BN formed the state government on March 17, 1994. The system provides an opportunity for leaders of the three major ethnic groups -- Muslim Bumiputera, non-Muslim Bumiputera and the Chinese

-- to head the state government, each for a two-year term.

The first chief minister under the system was Datuk Salleh Said Keruak, representing the Muslim Bumiputera, followed by Datuk Yong Teck Lee representing the Chinese community, and Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, representing the non-Muslim Bumiputera.

"I am going to keep the rotation system. We promised the people, we are going to stick to our promise," he said.

Asked about speculation rife in Sabah that a major opposition party will be accepted into the BN, Dr Mahathir said: "We cannot accept the opposition party because of its stand that only one ethnic group has the right to rule Sabah, a narrow-minded approach, whereas we provide an opportunity to all the communities to participate (in the government).

"We accepted (the opposition) previously. Their stand is that if there is much to be gained, they will want to or else, they will not. Right now, they feel that they have much to gain if they claim that if they win, the party will be admitted into the BN. It is just a ploy to win votes...we are well aware of their stand that only one ethnic group has the right to rule

(the state), he said.

On the claim by an opposition party in Sabah that it could obtain 70 per cent support from the people in the state, Dr Mahathir said that the opposition could claim anything.

Asked regarding his trip to Sabah, he said it would enable him to make an assessment and to observe preparations being made besides finding out the views of the BN component parties over the selection of candidates to be fielded in the coming polls.

Asked when the state election will be held, Dr Mahathir said he did not know yet.

Touching on the anti federal government issue played up by the opposition, Dr Mahathir said that he was very unhappy over this matter because he felt it should not be the way to seek popularity as it would create tension between the state and federal government.

He described such an action just to win votes, as irresponsible.

"In politics, we need to be responsible or else we will have problems," he said.

Dr Mahathir said that in some countries, riots occur because irresponsible politicians have raised issues to stir sentiments.

As such, he said, politicians should be responsible.

"We know of an opposition party which was close to the federal government previously and was prepared to hand over (part of) its territory to the federal government but if it denies it now, it is of no use.

"Actually, when they see that there is much benefit in being close to the federal government, it will go to the extent of giving up its territory," he said.

-- BERNAMA

ARA RM