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Sabah-Chinese (Special Report)

SPLIT SEEN IN VOTING TRENDS AMONG SABAH CHINESE

By: Eddy Lok

KOTA KINABALU, Feb 23 (Bernama) -- The Chinese are in the minority in Sabah but their votes are crucial deciders in this politically unpredictable and volatile state.

They have a history of switching support between Muslim-based and Kadazandusun parties in a state marked by traditional rivalries between the Muslims and non-Muslim Bumiputeras for political control.

This had often led to federal involvement which provided the calming effect that Sabah needs.

It is said that the Chinese are no longer kingmakers. Today, their role of decider and their political strength have been diluted by the redelineation of the electoral boundaries by the Election Commission, with Muslims now in the majority in 27 of the 48-seat Legislative Assembly, Kadazandusuns predominant in 13 seats, Chinese in seven seats and a constituency which is mixed.

For the 142,801 Chinese who have voting rights in the current ninth Sabah election, it is unclear who they would rally behind this time. There are about 313,300 Chinese in Sabah, concentrated largely in urban areas.

The Sabah Chinese, 80 per cent of whom do not depend on the government for their livelihood, are either in business like retailing or in the private sector, and they have no qualms about not giving their votes to the BN at the state level as past elections had shown, analysts say.

Despite this, the community is generally supportive of the federal leadership and the government of the day.

Other Chinese have something to do with the government such as undertaking contract works and being in the government itself.

Their votes are being wooed by the nine-party Sabah Barisan Nasional (BN), which is offering itself for re-election, and the opposition Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) led by Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan and Bersekutu headed by Datuk Harris Salleh, both former chief ministers, who once enjoyed good Chinese support for about nine years, each.

In the State BN alone, there are four Chinese-based parties competing for Chinese support. They are the Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP), Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Peninsula-based MCA and Gerakan.

At stake has always been their political life and economic interests. The present-day economic difficulties have raised even much more concern.

In the present scenario, it is still unclear how the Chinese will vote, according to a former Chinese leader and ex-Berjaya Cabinet Minister Datuk Lim Guan Sing.

"But, with the state of the economy and current business climate, we can expect a split in Chinese votes, especially with so many parties competing for their support," Lim, now a lawyer and watching the political developments from the sidelines, told Bernama.

There are 726,690 registered voters in Sabah.

In the past, the Chinese could help to decide who gets to enjoy political power or form the government at the end of an election when neither the Kadazandusun-based party or the Muslim-dominant party could garner enough support to do it on their own. Both have on a number of occasions obtained an equal number of seats.

"The Chinese want to have good governance ... So far, they have benefited from the trickled-down effects of government measures to revive the economy and it is really up to the BN to convince them they have done

better and could continue to do a better job," said the Institute for Development Studies executive-director Dr Mohd Yaakub Haji Johari.

To him, the Chinese are looking at what the various parties in the fray have in store for them in this economically-difficult time and the more rational among them would be risk-adverse, especially when Sabah has been able to withstand the downturn much better.

Sabah chalked up a growth of 2.5 per cent last year and this is expected to increase by another one per cent this year.

This coming polls will be Sabah's ninth election ever since it obtained Independence from Britain and joined Malaysia in 1963 and practised parliamentary democracy.

On record, the voting trend has been the Muslims voting en bloc on one side, the Kadazandusuns on another side - and both usually got about an equal number of seats which on their own they were unable to obtain power or form the government.

This was where the Chinese came into the picture in the past - which ever side they swung too, that side would be in power.

In 1976, when Berjaya toppled the Muslim-based Usno, the latter managed to retain 16 seats. In the 1985 election, when Berjaya was itself toppled by the then infant Kadazandusun-based PBS, Usno also won in 16 areas, again showing Muslims going en bloc to a Muslim party.

The same voting trend was seen in 1994 when Muslim votes were largely given to Umno which took the place of the deregistered Usno.

In 1985, the blame was put on the Chinese voters for helping to throw out the once-powerful Berjaya-led BN state government when they swung to Kadazandusun Paramount Chief Pairin and his newly-formed Kadazandusun-based PBS.

Yet, among urban-educated Chinese, there will definitely be some who may not vote at all, apparently discouraged by the political culture of local politicians who tend to switch camps, especially after they have been elected.

" The Chinese will turn to those who could get the economy going ... they have to chart a new future under the circumstances," said Chin Chen Fui, the treasurer-general of Bersekutu which has unveiled a number of economic plans.

" The Chinese are no longer deciders or kingmakers ... they could vote themselves into a position where they are out of the game if they are not careful ... they will be better off in a multi-racial party as they can still hope to hold high positions in the government," said Chin.

In the past, Chinese had also backed Chinese parties like the Sabah Chinese Party which is the first established Chinese party in Sabah.

It started off as the Sabah United Party which was Chinese-based, hoping to take in others like what the late Dato Onn Jaafar had tried to do for Umno during his leadership such as by opening it to non-Malays.

But for Sabah United Party, it planned to open up to non-Chinese only to shelve the idea as the late Tun Fuad Stephens in the early 1960s was banking on a racial party Upko and Tun Datu Mustapha Harun another which was based on racial and religious lines, Usno.

The Chinese, whose numbers are far less, as compared to some states like Perak, Penang or Sarawak, have a history of being divided when it comes to giving their political support except for the 1976 and 1981 state polls in which they displayed massive support for the Muslim-led Berjaya.

" Just like in 1994 when the Chinese were divided, the 1999 situation will be the same. Chinese voters will be taking a hard look at bread and butter issues more than being emotional such as on State rights, race and religion," said journalist Mohd Fauzi Patel.

According to Sabah's first Chinese Chief Minister Tan Sri Peter Lo, the

Sabah Chinese had traditionally voted for the BN, starting with its forerunner - the Alliance.

" All the Chinese want is good governance. What else is on their minds, I don't know..." remarked Lo.

The CEO of one of the 12 public-listed companies in Sabah is confident the majority of the Chinese will vote for the BN because of business considerations and political stability.

Political stability which in Sabah's context means friendly ties with the Federal Government and it is needless to say is highly essential after what was seen and experienced during the PBS era which was marked by legal challenges and a spate of disturbances.

Chinese business leaders have yet to openly display their support for the BN but Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had been warmly received by the community during his last week's visit to Sabah.

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