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State rights, oil revenue the core of polls campaign

Rashid Yusof

KOTA KINABALU, Fri. - For a few days now, an anonymous advertiser has taken a full-page advertisement in a local daily which shows an enlarged copy of a 1976 document detailing the transfer of Sabah's petroleum rights to Petronas.

The signatory of the document for Sabah was Datuk Harris Salleh, then Chief Minister and now head of Parti Bersekutu.

The intention is obvious as there is a raging debate on State rights during the campaign for the March 12-13 State election.

Harris, 68, has launched another bid for high office through Parti Bersekutu, a reason why past events are increasingly being given new spins.

Yesterday, the reply from Bersekutu was swift, and came with added vitriol. "Why flog the dead horse?" asked its statement rhetorically. The explanation by Bersekutu secretary-general Datuk Monggoh Orow was: "Sabah lost its oil rights when Parliament amended the Petroleum Mining Act 1966 in November 1969."

State rights had coloured this election along with the rotation system for the Chief Minister's post and the development agenda (poignant images of children with scabies-dotted feet walking for 30 minutes to school in the interior show how central it is.)

In the matter of rights, much sentiment was stirred by the combustible method of Parti Bersatu Sabah to explain the State rights to supporters.

"For every RM1 of Sabah's oil revenue, 95 sen goes to the Federal Government," Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan, PBS president and a former Chief Minister, kept saying.

At the grass roots, this issue becomes more emotive as the argument is expanded - like "Kuala Lumpur building mega projects with Sabah oil money".

As the Opposition whipped the emotions of the people, First Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin in a recent visit, said the Federal Government actually gave more to Sabah than it took. For instance, Government development expenditure and grants to Sabah last year was RM2.4 billion compared to the RM1.5 billion collected. This was also the case in preceding years.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had soon after arrival here last night, said the Federal Government had actually given special treatment to Sabah in terms of development to repair the damages inflicted by the PBS Government.

Dr Mahathir also touched on a subject which now dominates political gossip in Kota Kinabalu and Penampang - centre of Kadazandusun politics. It concerned Tan Sri Bernard G. Dompok's survival in Moyog as PBS goes all out to defeat the Chief Minister who won the seat since 1986 on a PBS ticket.

Hours after Dompok pulled a surprise - "I'll quit politics if I lose", Dr Mahathir was telling voters in Menggatal that the Kadazandusuns especially should ensure Dompok's victory. Thus, he can complete his two-year term as Chief Minister after the polls.

Today, a Dompok associate, Wilfred Tangau who is executive director of the Institute for Indigenous Economic Progress Sabah (Indep) provided the thinking behind the Dompok's virtual ultimatum.

"That remark came from Dompok's heart," said Tangau who said Dompok was

in politics to serve the people. "But he can't do so if his own constituents do not want him," Wilfred said.

Those close to Dompok alluded to the fact that he had turned down an offer to contest in a safe seat and that showed his qualities.

Watching Dompok from close quarters was his 25-year-old son, Carl. "My dad is no quitter ... the pressure is tremendous."

Thus, exactly one week before polling, the advertisement and Dompok's ultimatum show how the elements are combining to make the hustings exciting.

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