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Sabah-Moyog
THE HIGH-STAKE BATTLE FOR MOYOG

By: Azman Ujang

PENAMPANG (Sabah), Feb 18 (Bernama) -- In previous Sabah elections, the name Moyog hardly rang any bell, compared to places like Tambunan, the birthplace of Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) and stronghold of PBS president Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan.

But this time, the battle for the Kadazandusun vote in the polls expected to be held in mid-March, will centre around Moyog, the padi-growing Kadazandusun constituency nearest to the state capital.

It is a high-stake battle for the Kadazandusuns, which virtually carries with it the prize of the chief ministership of Sabah.

The stakes have increased since Monday when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad confirmed that the rotation system of the chief minister's post will continue if the Barisan Nasional (BN) returns to power.

This means that incumbent Moyog assemblyman Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, appointed chief minister last May under the system, will continue for at least another year if he and the BN win.

But it is far from plain-sailing for Dompok. His detractors think that had he not been chief minister for the past nine months, there's nothing to stop the PBS from scoring an easy win.

The reason is simple. Dompok won the seat in the 1994 election on the PBS ticket but he left the party in a spate of mass defections that toppled the PBS government to form Parti Demokratik Sabah (PDS), of which he is the president.

Pairin is unfazed by the notion that PBS would this time have to wrest the seat from an incumbent chief minister with Dompok having an obvious advantage.

"Sabah has had five chief ministers in the last five years. It's no big deal. The people of Sabah including the Kadazandusun have other bigger issues to settle in this coming election," Pairin told Bernama during a visit to the constituency.

To Pairin, issues like the buying and selling of State Assemblymen that could reverse the outcome of the state election, the large number of immigrants becoming registered voters and the rotation of the chief minister's post, are major concerns of the voters.

Dompok's supporters say their leader has served his constituency "very well" and does not discriminate against the Kadazandusuns' political affiliations when it comes to giving government assistance.

"Deserving children in the constituency are given scholarships. Don't forget the recent floods which hit the Penampang district. The people will be much worse off without the personal attention Dompok paid to the area," says one of his campaigners at the PDS operations room.

The PBS is expected to field another prominent Moyog son, Datuk Clarence Bongkos Malakun, to wrest the seat back from Dompok in the polls.

Malakun, who served several years as Managing Director of Sabah Forest Industries Sdn Bhd, a major pulp and paper producer in Sipitang, has made a couple of attempts to win the Moyog seat but has not got over the jinx.

In the first attempt in 1985, he was disqualified on nomination day as a PBS candidate for technical reasons.

He again contested in Moyog as an independent candidate in the 1994 election and managed to obtain 3,360 votes against 6,615 polled by Dompok.

When a Bernama team dropped by at PDS operations centre here the other

night, election workers were busy painting the white "dacing" (scale) on piles of navy blue flags, the BN symbol.

A Dompok aide says: " We have so far done more than 15,000 flags to be put up at the constituency".

" Going by the number of flags put up by the BN here, the BN will win but the flags don't vote," a local newspaper journalist here says cynically.

His observation is not without basis. The PBS Chinese New Year "open house" held at the Kadazandusun Cultural Association Centre or Hongkod Koisaan here yesterday was a massive crowd-puller.

At times crowd-control became difficult as people pushed for food and drinks served, prompting the master of ceremony to appeal for order, saying: "The food is more than enough for everyone."

For PDS, Moyog, thanks to Dompok being the chief minister, is also its best bet among the 11 Kadazandusun seats it is expected to contest, despite facing the uphill task of convincing the Kadazandusuns to throw their support behind the BN and not the opposition PBS.

But some PDS campaigners did admit the task is far from easy.

" We were the same people who wooed voters to support the PBS in the 1994 election. Now, we have to ask them to vote for the BN...it's not going to be easy considering this is the PBS stronghold," says another Dompok aide.

Dompok can, however, bank on the support of the other BN component parties to help ensure victory.

" We will go all out to deliver the 1,400-odd Muslim votes in the area to Dompok. If necessary, I will personally go down to campaign for him," Land and Cooperative Development Minister Tan Sri Kasitah Gaddam, who is Kinabalu Umno division chief, told Bernama at his home in Ranau, the wind-swept town on the foothills of Mount Kinabalu.

Pairin is confident of PBS retaining the "hot" seat, which according to some party insiders, is like a rallying point for PBS to settle the score with Dompok.

PBS makes no secret about the fact it is still bitter over Dompok's defection to the BN soon after the 1994 polls.

PBS' confidence stems from its victory over Dompok in the Penampang parliamentary constituency in the general election held just a year after he defected.

The loss caused Dompok his federal Cabinet post in Kuala Lumpur but he was appointed to the state Cabinet instead before becoming chief minister.

It's a do-or-die battle for the 49-year-old chief minister, described by some as one of Sabah's brightest political stars.

He once said that politically he was living by the day.

" I was born, raised and studied here. Moyog is my place and it is not my wish to abandon the people of Moyog," he said, referring to calls from supporters, including from the prime minister himself, that he moves to another constituency considered "safer" than Moyog to defend.

And Dompok is convinced that the people of Moyog are not about to do the same.

-- BERNAMA

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