

15 MAR 1999  
Sabah-Dompok  
TO MANY, DOMPOK'S LOSS DIFFICULT TO SWALLOW

By: Azman Ujang

KOTA KINABALU, March 15 (Bernama) -- The morning after his sensational defeat in the Moyog constituency to a Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) candidate, Tan Sri Bernard Dompok took his family to Kampung Putaton, his birthplace in the Penampang district.

He barely had any sleep the night before as party supporters, friends and Barisan Nasional (BN) leaders, including Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, continued to call at his house, offering words of comfort.

Dompok, an ardent angler, went fishing at a pond near his parents' house and caught several fish, before returning to his house here towards the evening.

"He normally does this on Sundays as a means of relaxation from his busy schedules for the week," said an aide.

And yesterday was no different although Dompok's loss inevitably means his days as chief minister of Sabah was quickly coming to an end.

When he returned to his house here by sunset, he was swarmed by dozens of supporters, mostly BN supporters from outstation many of whom came from as far as Tambunan in the interior.

They embraced him and virtually everyone was speechless but from their body language, it was obvious that Dompok's defeat was a bitter pill to swallow.

The scene was repeated last night when visitors thronged his house till 4 in the morning.

"I just can't understand what has gone into the Kadazandusun mind. Here they have a clear choice in voting for Tan Sri Dompok and have someone among them continue to be chief minister of Sabah and yet he lost," said a woman who described his defeat as "a huge loss of our community".

"It's not only ridiculous but stupid for our community to reject such a fine leader like Tan Sri (Dompok)," she told Bernama.

All the 12 Parti Demokratik Sabah (PDS) candidates who contested in the polls were there as well, as were the party's supreme council members who earlier held a meeting to persuade him to stay on as PDS president.

Of the 12, only two won -- Datuk Wences Angang in the Kuala Penyu constituency and Datuk Siringan Gubat in Ranau, thanks largely to the two areas having a big Muslim electorate.

In this election, the Muslim electorate overwhelmingly returned candidates from Umno, which scored 100 per cent success when all its 24 candidates won.

Dompok, 49, had repeatedly said during the election campaign that he was putting his "life's work" to the test in the Moyog constituency and would quit politics if he lost.

"We still need him. We all knew it's not going to be easy to fight the PBS for control of the Kadazandusun constituencies but we are confident that the community will eventually support the BN," said one of the defeated candidates who requested anonymity.

The first to express sadness over Dompok's loss just after the outcome was known on Saturday night was none other than Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

He had told the people of Sabah while campaigning in the state that Dompok would continue as chief minister under the rotation system and called on the voters to ensure his and the BN's victory.

Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah, who announced the appointment of Sabah Umno chief Datuk Osu Sukam as the new chief minister to succeed Dompok today, said Dompok's defeat was "highly disappointing" to the BN.

"He is a very good man. I have never met such a caring and humble leader from our (Kadazandusun) community," said Damianus Takong, 44, who has been Dompok's driver for four years.

"He has brought about much development in the Moyog constituency since he was elected for the last four elections and I just don't understand his defeat.

"He is always concerned for the welfare of the people. I and the other staff working with him have never seen such a caring boss," he said.

When asked to compare him with PBS president Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan, revered by the Kadazandusun as their 'huguan siou' (paramount chief), another Dompok aide said: "Tan Sri Dompok has that human touch which even Pairin doesn't exude".

Damianus agreed.

"I have never seen him get angry or raise his voice. Even when he came under intense personal attack by the PBS during this election campaign, he countered not by attacking PBS leaders personally but was bent only on pursuing his development agenda for the Kadazandusuns.

Some PDS leaders met last night at Dompok's house said that his chances of winning Moyog brightened during the campaign period but suddenly took a dive some three days before polling according to a random survey in the constituency.

"When we asked around who they were going to vote, most people that we met gave the handshake sign," said one of them, referring to the PBS' party symbol of a handshake.

"That's when we knew that the PBS was going to take Moyog."

PBS candidate Datuk Clarence Bongkos Malakun in fact secured the highest number of votes in the election on his way to beating Dompok. He polled 10,870 votes to Dompok's 6,482 votes.

An aide said knowing the Kadazandusun votes would most likely go PBS way, Dompok was banking on the support of the 7,000-odd Chinese votes but just over 1,000-odd Chinese voters went out to cast their ballots.

"I think the Chinese had wanted the Kadazandusuns to fend for themselves in Moyog given the high stakes the contest entailed," was how one party supporter put it.

Ironically, even Dr Mahathir appeared to have somewhat prophesied that Dompok would have much problems retaining Moyog under the BN banner as he had won the last three elections on the PBS ticket, the party he left in 1994 to join the ruling coalition.

It was for this that Dr Mahathir had earlier offered Dompok a "safer" seat but this was turned down by Dompok who said he must defend the seat because he was born, bred and schooled in Moyog, located in the Penampang district, billed as the heartland of Kadazandusuns.

"Come to think of it, Dr Mahathir was right but that's politics," said a another defeated PDS candidate.

A local editor said Dompok was the most media savvy chief minister Sabah has had.

"He is intelligent, very accessible to the media and charming", he said.

--BERNAMA

AU SK