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Sabah-Merger (News Analysis)

WHICH KADAZANDUSUN PARTIES SHOULD MERGE?

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KOTA KINABALU, April 4 (Bernama) -- Talk of a possible merger among political parties representating the Kadazandusuns, who comprise more than half of Sabah's population, is gathering steam even as the dust has begun to settle following last month's state election and formation of the government.

What has cropped up is whether the three Kadazandusun-based parties in the state Barisan Nasional (BN) government which fared disastrously in the election should merge to beef up their political strength which was eroded with the massive support for the opposition Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) and a virtual non-support for BN Kadazandusun candidates.

Merging of Kadazandusun parties is not really a new political development. It took place way back in the mid-1960s.

And, even if the three parties -- Parti Demokratik Sabah (PDS), Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS) and Akar -- do merge, the question arises as to whether it would resolve the community's leadership issue and whether the new grouping could effectively claim to represent the Kadazandusuns.

Largely, the Kadazandusuns look to PBS, another Kadazandusun-based party, for leadership, judging from the incessant political backing the community has been giving the party which won 17 of the 48 seats - mostly in Kadazandusun constituencies - in the polls. And, in terms of popular votes, PBS secured about 40 per cent.

So the merger talk has gone to an extent where it involves PBS but it has drawn a prompt response from party leaders who pooch-pooched the idea as something that only the three BN Kadazandusun parties should chew and digest on.

The possibility of merger was started by defeated PBRS president Datuk Joseph Kurup who said it would strengthen the Kadazandusuns' representation at government level.

This followed the dismal showing of the BN Kadazandusun candidates in the election. All four PBRS and Akar candidates standing on BN tickets were defeated and of the 12 PDS candidates including former Chief Minister Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, only two survived the Kadazandusun politics of punishing the so-called "political frogs", and staying put with their Huguang Siou (paramount chief) Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan.

Dr Mohd Yaakub Johari, the executive director of the Institute for Development Studies, has suggested that any such talk of merging must necessarily include the PBS.

If merger does come about minus the PBS it would not resolve the leadership question for the Kadazandusuns as the party has had massive support from them, he reasoned.

For Chief Minister and Sabah Umno head Datuk Osu Sukam, the fate of PDS, PBRS and Akar lies in the hands of the Kadazandusuns themselves.

He is okay with efforts to reduce politicking among BN components - a total of nine in Sabah - and reckoned it is entirely up to the Kadazandusuns to decide for themselves over the question of unity and political representation.

For the Kadazandusun community in Malaysia's second largest state, several political parties have come and gone, competing for their support each time, just like the various Malay and Chinese parties in the state had done.

Pasok Momogun, an interior party which represented Kadazandusuns in

general, merged with United National Kadazans Organisation (Unko) and adopted a new name in the mid 1960s to become the United Pasok Momogon Kadazandusun Organisation (Upko).

Both parties had had roles in the Alliance government which ruled the state from 1963 to 1967 under several leaders like the late Tun Fuad Stephens, Tan Sri Peter Lo, the late Tun Datu Mustapha Harun and the late Tun Said Keruak.

"But, as far as PBS is concerned, the merger does not arise. It is for the BN Kadazandusun leaders to decide. We have about 213,000 popular votes and that speaks for itself," said PBS information chief Henrynus Amin.

The immediate aftermath of the just-concluded state election saw the Kadazandusuns greatly under-represented, with PBS failing to form the government after having received the bulk of the Kadazandusun votes. PBS won 17 seats while BN bagged 31 seats.

Then, many among the community had thought that PBS was popular enough to win the majority number of seats while others believed the redelineation of the state's electoral boundaries, which put the number of Muslim majority constituencies at a comfortable lead, had put paid to PBS' chances of ever returning to power.

However, the issue of the Kadazandusuns being under-represented in the government has been redressed to a large extent by the BN's concept of power sharing. Defeated PDS Tamparuli candidate Datuk Wilfred Bumburing was nominated as an assemblyman and made one of the three deputy chief ministers and minister of infrastructure development.

The Sabah Constitution allows for six nominated assemblymen to be appointed as additional members to the 48-elected-seat state legislature to represent specific and minority interests.

"It is a question of leadership and credibility ... these BN Kadazandusun parties cannot really claim to represent the Kadazandusuns," said a local politician.

Politically, the Kadazandusuns had had the best of time under PBS' rule - from April 1985 to February 1994. There were strong cabinet representations and several top and significant state positions were held by them. The BN 'corrected' the situation when it formed the government following the collapse of the PBS through massive defections after the 1994 election.

PBS deputy president Dr Maximus Ongkili has joined the fray over the merger proposal by saying that it might perhaps be a better idea if the 'splinter' PDS, Akar and PBRS could dissolve instead and join the PBS to help the community.

Saying that any talk about the three parties merging with PBS did not arise, Maximus added that their fate had already been 'decided forever' by the people at the recent election and that they had no grassroot support.

His party colleague, information chief Henrynus added: "We have about 213,000 of popular votes cast, which is about 40 per cent, and we will stay the way the people want it."

Umno information chief Datuk Karim Ghani has this piece of advice for PDS, Akar and PBRS leaders: "Please discuss the proposed merger without having to go to the press which in the end could lead to nothing.

"From past experiences, whenever they went to the papers over an issue like this, they never succeeded in doing what they had hoped to do. If they sit down quietly and discuss the matter, they can see things more clearly."

One of the two PDS candidates who succeeded in the election, Datuk Siringan Gubat, said PBS leaders might still be celebrating Dompok's defeat but the Kadazandusun people are not in the mood to celebrate his loss.

Dompok's chief ministership of two years - courtesy of the rotation system introduced by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad - was

cut short by more than a year due to his failure to be reelected in the Moyog constituency.

As a result, Osu also become chief minister much earlier than expected, going by the rotation system whose very existence is now also a subject of intense debate.

Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan, a brother of Pairin, said PBS should not be left out when it comes to merging all Kadazandusun-based parties.

A merger if it does come at all, is highly unlikely to see the dissolution of the PBS with the massive Kadazandusun backing it has been enjoying.

Only time will tell if the other Kadazandusun parties could survive into the next election as separate entities given the community's clear preference for PBS as things stand today.

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