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`Wild' Sabah is a different kettle of fish

A. Kadir Jasin

THOSE hoping to see the March 12 and 13 Sabah election as the barometer of national politics may be making the mistake of over-simplifying the situation in the State.

While it is true that the Sabah polls will be the first major election to be held in the aftermath of the national economic and political crises, the peculiarity of Sabah politics will make the exercise less of an indicator of national politics.

As has been apparent in recent weeks, the main point of the opposition campaign is the allegation that the State is being dominated by the Centre.

In an indirect way, it is an admission by the opposition parties in the State that even during these bad economic times, the Federal Government is better able to bring development to the State than if it goes on its own.

The State-based opposition parties, in particular the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), have sought to portray the visits by Federal leaders in recent weeks as an example of the domination of the State by the Centre.

Of course, PBS was as dependent on Federal leaders to campaign on its behalf and on Federal funds to keep the development of the State going when it was the leading partner of the State Barisan Nasional from 1986.

Then in the 1990 parliamentary election, thinking that the BN was facing a formidable challenge in the peninsula from the Pas-led Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (Apu) and the DAP-led Gagasan Rakyat Malaysia, PBS decided to switch camps at the eleventh hour.

PBS' betrayal cost the BN dearly.

It won only six out of the 20 parliamentary seats in the State.

But PBS' allies in the peninsula made little progress.

In the State election that followed, PBS won 36 seats as opposed to 12 clinched by Usno.

In 1991, Umno established itself in the State in place of Usno which opted for voluntary dissolution.

When the State election was held in 1994, the fight was essentially between PBS and Umno. The former, which contested in all the 48 constituencies, took a beating and won 25 against the Umno-led BN which took 23 seats.

Pas, which contested in three constituencies, and the DAP in two were routed.

PBS went on to form the State Government with the inclusion of six nominated members.

But a month later, it collapsed when all but three of its members defected to the BN.

Umno and its minor partners went on to form the State Government and introduced the system of rotating the Chief Minister's post among the three main communities in the State - Muslim Bumiputeras, non-Muslim Bumiputeras and non-Bumiputeras.

By the time the State Legislative Assembly was dissolved on Monday, PBS had only four members in the Dewan.

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STILL it will be a tough battle for the BN, in particular Umno, which has since become the main BN partner in the State, to retain control.

Matching its national aspirations, policies and practices with those of its State coalition partners has not been easy. Even within the party

itself, trying to change old habits and practices can be a touchy issue.

It is not surprising that seven years after Umno decided to take a bold step to cross the South China Sea and plant its flag in Sabah, many people still think it was a mistake.

The more outspoken critics of the move say Sabah Umno exists only in name. The spirit remains the same - wild, volatile and unpredictable - as has always been since the State became a part of Malaysia in 1963.

But in at least one very important case, Sabah Umno has proven its ability to rise above the narrow ethnic consideration. This is over the very difficult and touchy issue of the rotation of the Chief Minister's post.

Despite its predominance in the State Assembly, it was willing to relinquish its hold on the Chief Minister's post in order to accommodate the interest of the minorities and to fulfil the pledge made by party president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the run-up to the last State election.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who has been leading the BN campaign in recent weeks, is confident that the BN can retain the State if the component parties are willing to continue with the policy of accommodation and to accept decisions on seat allocation and the selection of candidates.

Still money politics looms large. Over the decades, voters in the State have come to associate elections with the offer of free unit trust shares, higher dividend pay-out, duit tambang (fare money) and an endless feast.

Economic crisis in itself is not expected to be a major setback for the BN. Sabah's economy, being more agrarian and resource-based, is less affected by the recession.

The unsettling effects of the development surrounding the former Deputy Prime Minister have also died down especially with the appointment of Abdullah as Deputy Prime Minister and key player in the State election.

Freewheeling Sabahans are less attracted to rhetoric and high-sounding philosophical hogwash than they are to simpler, more basic everyday promises and duit tambang.

So those expecting to see the chips to start falling in Sabah may be disappointed.

It is even doubtful that the nationally-based opposition parties like the DAP and Pas, which have been crowing like cockerels in recent months, would dare to put their money where their mouth is when it comes to Sabah.

The DAP, which is not unfamiliar with Sabah politics, is aware of the risk. Voters in the State had in the past several elections voted in and booted out its candidates according to their fancy.

Pas has also been flapping its wings but may have to think twice before making another futile flight across the South China Sea.

Thus far, the big talk by the opposition may not amount to anything more than sabre-rattling. They would not dare go to Sabah to challenge the BN if only to be humiliated.

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IT isn't very fair for some people to openly condemn the Government and yet expect to be employed by it.

This is even more so when their action is politically or ideologically motivated. Such people should willingly withdraw or resign from the government service or its agencies.

They cannot hope to be credible in their struggle if they continue to be employed by the very Government they are condemning.

They cannot expect to have the cake and eat it at the same time. Also it does not serve truth and justice that they claim to be championing if they care only for their own interests and comfort.

When Universiti Malaya recently decided not to renew the contract of a certain professor, a big fuss was made of it.

Yet nothing is heard when the services of other professors and lecturers were not continued when their contracts expired.

According to a list provided by the office of the registrar of the university, the services of 17 such staff - Malays, Chinese and Indians - were not continued when their contracts expired between 1997 and this year.

Are these people unimportant or less qualified? Or is it because they are not "big names" and, therefore, not entitled to justice?

The fact is the university has its own plans and they require the rationalisation of its teaching staff.

In any case, if anybody wants to fight the Government, the best way is not to work for it. In that way, he or she can really be free to fight.

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THE recent efforts by the Government to boost tourism promotion activities in the major tourist markets stand a better chance of succeeding if they are treated as a collective effort.

For this reason, I would like to acknowledge the efforts of Immigration director-general Datuk Aseh Che Mat in promoting the "service with a smile" campaign among his officers.

I have always believed that it is very important for immigration officers at the ports of entry to not only provide an efficient service but more so to show a friendly face.

A smile does not cost a dime but can rake in immeasurable dividends. If Malaysians are known for their smiling faces, there is no reason why those who work for the Government should put on sour faces.

More recently, another source of threat to the efforts is the rise in the number of beggars, street peddlers and kutu rayau (vagrants).

One of the reasons, minor though it may be, why tourists and visitors are put off by any country is the prevalence of beggars and street peddlers.

In some poorer Asian and African cities and resorts, it is impossible for a foreign-looking person to step out of his or her hotel without being hounded by packs of beggars and peddlers. Even in Europe and North America, beggars are becoming a nuisance in major cities.

Poverty and the tolerance of some societies towards begging have led to beggars becoming aggressive and bothersome. They will not take no for an answer.

And it is a big mistake for a person to give to one beggar and not to the entire pack pursuing him or her.

The Welfare Department, the police and the enforcement units of local governments should intensify action against beggars, peddlers, dadah addicts and kutu rayau. Emphasis must be placed on rounding up and deporting foreign beggars.

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MY apologies for not coming out with this column last week. It was due to a combination of a bad habit and unforeseen circumstances.

The problem with most people who write columns is they cannot or will not start penning their articles unless the deadline is staring at them in the face like the angel of death.

I had no intention whatsoever of not coming out with the column. But as I was waking up in the wee hour of Saturday to write it, I was struck by a bad case of diarrhoea, causing me, as the New Sunday Times put it, to be "indisposed".

Of course, not every reader believed it. Especially those who read Mingguan Malaysia's column Yang Tersirat Yang Tersurat authored by its

Editor-in Chief Khalid Mohd.

Coincidentally, Khalid had decided to terminate his fairly recently started but widely-read column at the same time as I was unable to write mine.

It is not surprising that some concerned friends and readers called to enquire if I was going to be temporarily or permanently indisposed. Some, jokingly, asked if I had been disposed of.

Knowing Khalid from the days he started journalism in the mid-70s, I am sure he has a strong reason for stopping the column.

Of course there will be enough people who subscribe to the conspiracy theory who will want to believe that Yang Tersirat Yang Tersurat has fallen victim of censorship.

With the media being the target of multi-million ringgit suits, Khalid may be able to sleep well at night knowing that at least he is not contributing towards putting his newspaper to such a risk.

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