

# Who will PM tap as Sabah CM?

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**U**nder the rotation system, the Sabah Chief Minister's post will fall vacant only in March next year but intense lobbying is already underway among key leaders in the state Barisan Nasional to fill the post, writes **EDDY LOK**

Politically-restless Sabah is once again abuzz as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad arrives today for a three-day visit.

It is one of his legacies that is at the centre of intense speculation: who will be the next chief minister of Sabah under the state's unique system where the Chief Minister's post is rotated between the three main communities in Sabah – the Muslim bumiputras, the non-Muslim bumiputras and the Chinese.

Chief Minister Osu Sukam is due to vacate his post in March and it is the turn of a non-Muslim bumiputra to fill the post.

The state and parliamentary elections in Sabah ended in November and before the dust had settled, political parties in the ruling coalition are already lobbying to stake an early claim to the top post.

Whoever gets the job will become the sixth chief minister in just seven years.

Mahathir made the rotation system work when the Barisan formed the government in 1884. The system was designed to accommodate the three communities.

Mahathir will open the United Pasok Momogun Kadazandusun Organisation (Upko) sixth annual congress.

Upko, led by Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, has already staked a claim for the chief minister's post.

The Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS), led by Tan Sri Joseph Kurup, is the main rival to Upko. It, too, has staked its claim.

The intense lobbying was triggered off by the PBRS which underwent a resurrection this month. Six assemblymen, who had earlier resigned from the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), joined the PBRS.

Overnight, the PBRS, rejected by the electorate in the last election, became the biggest Kadazandusun-Murut party in the BN. Its clout enhanced, members and leaders speculated that PBRS had earned the right to the chief ministership post.

Kurup, who failed to win any election since he formed the party, said it is Mahathir who should decide on the new chief minister. "Let's not quarrel over it. Let the Prime Minister decide."

Kurup missed the chance to fill the top slot when Mahathir chose Dompok in 1888, when it was the turn of the Kadazandusuns to fill the post.

At that time, Dompok's party, then known as Parti Demokratik Sabah (PDS), was the biggest Kadazandusun component in the state BN.

A senior Umno leader said in view of the changes in the party dispositions, Upko, with only three assemblymen in its stable, fears the PBRS will eclipse its chance to lead

the state government.

"This is embarrassing, and it is no wonder Dompok wants a halt to speculation on who will be the next chief minister. What if PBRS gets the job?" the Umno leader told *The Sun*.

It is speculated that even Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan, who led the PBS defectors into PBRS, is vying for the top post, with his aides claiming there is no better candidate for the post than Jeffrey

Others pooh-poohed the possibility of Jeffrey, younger brother of PBS president Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan, at the helm of the state.

Upko secretary-general Datuk Wences Angang argues that the resurrected PBRS is not a contender because "a strong understanding" had been reached between the parties over the rotation system.

Wences said Dompok's term as chief minister was shortened by his defeat in last year's polls.

"There is no argument

against allowing the party to complete the remaining 13 months as leader of the state government," he says.

"There is an understanding that it will be Upko's turn again when Osu steps down," said Wences, the Sabah Minister of Resource Development and Information Technology.

While the Kadazandusun leaders lobby for the post, it is not clear whether Osu wants to vacate the post by March.

His predecessor, Datuk Salleh Said Keruak, also wanted to stay on and sought help from Kuala Lumpur to drop the rotation system but, in the end, the realities of Sabah politics ensured that Salleh give up the post to Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) leader Datuk Yong Teck Lee.

Still Sabah Umno has not given up the idea of keeping the seat for itself. Its reasons – Umno is the biggest political party among the nine components in the Sabah BN.

It says Umno won all 24

state seats it contested, and soon after the state election, two PBS defectors increased the number to 26.

"The strong vote from the people of Sabah is an endorsement that Sabah Umno can keep the post," a Sabah Umno leader said.

To date and very wisely, the Umno's top leadership has maintained the rotation system to keep the Kadazandusun and Chinese in Sabah happy.

The Chinese community is a big winner under the system. While only winning six or seven seats, it gets to appoint one among its members as chief minister.

While rotating the post is politically astute given the volatile nature of Sabah politics, the question remains whether administratively it is a wise move.

Institute for Development Studies economist Dr Pang Teck Wai says the system will stay, unless all the BN components are unanimous in wanting it scrapped.

"It is a short two-year term and each chief minister will want to maximise his ability and power to do whatever he can for his development plans and his support base," he says.

Such a consensus is unlikely given the fact that the chief minister's post is the focal point of Sabah politics and a large number of feuding politicians and political parties desire the post.

The system had given a semblance of stability to Sabah politics despite the intense lobbying for the post.

Mahathir had promised that all communities will have a chance to share power and, on the strength of that, the people supported the Barisan Nasional.

There is little reason now to break that promise and rock the boat.

It might turn out that if the system is scrapped, the opposition PBS and its president, Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan, might be the benefactors.