

16/08/2000

Fight for political supremacy is a hotter issue brewing in Sabah

Joseph Bingkasan

AMIDST the debate on whether the rotation of the Chief Minister's post should be continued or otherwise, a hotter issue is brewing among the Kadazandusun and Murut-based political parties in Sabah.

Since the State election in March last year, it is obvious that three such parties are "fighting" for political supremacy.

They are the United Pasok Momogun Kadazandusun and Murut Organisation (Upko), Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRs) from the Barisan Nasional and the opposition Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS).

Upko is headed by Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Tan Sri Bernard Dompok while nominated Assemblyman Tan Sri Joseph Kurup is the PBRs president.

PBS, Sabah's main Opposition party, is headed by former Chief Minister Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan.

Dompok said based on the State and parliamentary elections last year, Upko had been accepted not only by the Kadazandusun and Murut communities, but also by others as their representative in BN.

Dompok said in the past many political leaders changed party from time to time because at that time, they could not find the party which had genuine leaders they could trust.

"Now most of those in the Kadazandusun and Murut communities have found their answer in Upko," he said.

Dompok's views was echoed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad when he opened Upko's sixth annual congress in Kota Kinabalu last month.

Dr Mahathir had said Upko was now supported not only by the Kadazandusun and Murut but also by the other races, including the Muslim Bumiputera community.

Alex Martin, Upko's executive secretary who is also one of the party's supreme council members, said the party now had 27 divisions throughout the State.

"As endorsed by the party's congress last month, Upko is ready to spread its wing to Peninsular Malaysia," he said.

Not to be overshadowed, Kurup said PBRs now had 32 divisions throughout the State. He said the party was "flooded" with so many application forms that PBRs had to print new membership forms every week.

Kurup said PBS members were crossing to BN mainly because they had realised that only the national coalition could bring development to the State.

"I have often informed Dr Mahathir that PBRs is getting stronger while PBS' strength is eroding," he said.

It was only last weekend that PBRs received another boost when 11 PBS Youth executive council members ditched Pairin to join Kurup's party.

But it was on Easter Day that PBRs was saved from the "brink of political oblivion" when six PBS Assemblymen join the party. The six, headed by Pairin's younger brother Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan, was promptly given important posts in PBRs.

Compared to Upko which won two seats in last year's State election, PBRs failed to get any with Kurup defeated by Jeffrey in Bingkor. Kurup had since been made a nominated Assemblyman.

True to the political saying that "there is no permanent enemy in Sabah's politics", Kurup made Jeffrey PBRs' deputy president one, senior

to two other deputy presidents.

Currently, the number two behind Umno in term of the number of Assemblymen in the State Assembly, Kurup said PBRs was now ready to take up posts in the State Cabinet should there be a reshuffle.

"But it is up to the BN leadership (to decide)," Kurup said.

Upon being admitted into BN through PBRs, Jeffrey has set his priority high - to weaken PBS which he said was no longer relevant to Sabah politics due to the party's confrontation with Kuala Lumpur.

Jeffrey said although PBS claimed that it still commanded strong support from the people of Sabah, the past several elections had, however, indicated otherwise.

He said he had even advised Pairin to retire from politics and to concentrate on his role as the Huguan Siou (paramount/brave leader) of the Kadazandusun and Murut communities.

Pairin, who is Tambunan Assemblyman and the Member of Parliament for Keningau, is the second holder of the title, the first being Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens.

Pairin, who was Chief Minister from 1985 to March 1994, said he had never entertained the thought of retiring from politics as there were still a lot of things for him to do.

He told a gathering in Keningau that Jeffrey's suggestion was a form of conspiracy to overthrow him and also part of his (Jeffrey) personal agenda to hurt him (Pairin).

PBS now has nine Assemblymen and two MPs, including Pairin.

In addition to the 48 divisions in Sabah, the party also has others divisions in Peninsular Malaysia and the Federal Territory of Labuan.

Though these leaders are now in different "camps", politically, they were once one when they jointly formed the PBS on March 15, 1985.

If the leaders of the three parties could just work together with other BN component parties, harmony and political stability in Sabah would soon be a reality.

(END)