

18/07/2000

Land of Hornbill not ready to give up political treasure to Umno yet

Shamsul Akmar

IN the moonlight, Gunung Santubong stands aloof above the beautiful Damai resort some 30 minutes away from Kuching.

The majestic mountain seems to jealously keep vigil over its surroundings.

This lends romance to the local myth that in it, lies the spirit of the proud, beautiful princess, Puteri Santubong, from whom it derives its name.

But Gunung Santubong is not the only natural attraction in the Land of the Hornbill and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad discovered another when he officiated the opening of the Borneo Highlands Resort on Saturday.

The opening of the resort, built by developer Tan Sri Lee Kim Yew, marked yet another milestone in Sarawak's efforts to be a mainstream player in the domestic and regional tourism industry.

However, much as the locals seemed quite accommodating in allowing Peninsular Malaysians to share their treasure trove of beautiful tourist attractions, it is not so when it comes to politics.

The widespread talk of Umno wanting to spread its wings to Sarawak, for example, had somewhat been perceived negatively by most local political pundits.

Though not openly discussed by State political leaders, every time the issue of Umno coming to Sarawak is raised, one can almost feel the negative vibes generated.

This persists despite repeated assurance by Dr Mahathir, who is Umno president, that the party does not want to go to Sarawak.

The fact that the the idea of bringing Umno to Sarawak is actually hatched by former State leaders who had served at Federal level enhanced the intrigue and theories of conspiracy unfurled.

A pro-Barisan Nasional political observer pointed out that it was not so much the rejection of Umno but the fear that its presence may affect the coalition's powerful grip, under the leadership of the Malay-Melanau based Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB).

"There are already enough problems with Pas and Parti Keadilan Nasional attempting to erode BN rule. Wrong timing by Umno to venture into this State may lead to further political uncertainties," he added.

Others less supportive of BN view Umno as a peninsula-based party and if it comes to Sarawak, this will only mean further Federal control, not only within the administrative context but also political.

While no one can fault the people of Sarawak in terms of their pride about being Malaysians, they are, however, quite jealous of their political existence and want that to be determined by their own people.

However, local proponents of Umno coming to Sarawak view the idea as giving rise to increasing State participation in national politics.

"Given the fact that Sarawak has the biggest number of parliamentary seats, it will have as many number of divisions if Umno were to come here.

"With 28 divisions, we will have considerable weight in deciding who should get the important party posts and in time to come, a Sarawak leader can become the Umno president which means becoming the Prime Minister," said a local supporter of Umno.

This is a political equation with many ifs and buts.

But the more pressing issue which needs to be addressed is definitely

that of national integration.

The meeting between Dr Mahathir and Medan Nunjing, father of army commando Mathew who was killed in the Sauk incident should augur well for national integration.

But one-off things like that are not enough much as it should not be taken lightly especially when it was the Prime Minister himself who made such an effort while some other local leaders themselves were quite slow in their reaction, as a disappointed Medan lamented.

That aside, locals too have complained over the insensitivity of Peninsular Malaysians when visiting Sarawak.

"Sometimes, even in light conversation, remarks like 'we are from Malaysia' being uttered by our friends from Semenanjung makes us uncomfortable.

"It is as if we Sarawakians are not Malaysians," said one.

At the same time, much as these slips of the tongue do damage relations, the immigration policy in Sarawak, which requires Peninsular Malaysians to produce their passports or fill up forms on entry, has also been a bone of contention for those from across the South China Sea.

Their contention is that the people of Sarawak can move in and out of Kuala Lumpur without such regulations, so why should they be subjected to such when going to Kuching.

All these go to show that there are many underlying issues which are still contentious, enough to feed the suspicious mind.

Then again, 37 years of marriage between Semenanjung and Sarawak is a short time in the context of nation-building.

It will take time before a satisfactory level of national integration can be realised.

As such, Umno should expect that the people of Sarawak will be jealously guarding their political treasure.

While waiting for them to open up on that front, there is still the beautiful Gunung Santubong which they have offered to share.

(END)