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Upko must work to become voice of the communities it represents

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WHEN Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad opens the United Pasok Momogun Kadazan Organisation (Upko) national congress in Kota Kinabalu today, the significance is that this party seems to be very much a revitalised version of the Parti Demokratik Sabah.

The Barisan Nasional chairman had also opened the PDS fourth congress headed by Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Tan Sri Bernard Dompok on Aug 15, 1998. Last year's congress - the last to be held by PDS - on Aug 7 was opened by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Delegates to the last meeting unanimously voted for PDS to be dissolved to pave the way for the revival of the Kadazandusun and Murut-based political party, Upko.

The party had taken a leaf from the book of its counterparts in the peninsula when it was realised that Malaysia can best be governed with the participation of all communities through the Alliance and later Barisan Nasional.

A year has now passed and Dompok has been able to make inroads into the hinterland of the State, winning over support in traditional opposition Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) strongholds.

The change in identity had inspired the party leaders to strive for greater heights in championing the cause of the Kadazandusun and Murut communities.

With a catching slogan Misompuru Tokou Wagu which literally means 'Let us be united again', Upko was officially launched on Oct 30, last year in Ranau, a Kadazandusun-populated district at the foot of Malaysia's highest mountain, Mount Kinabalu.

Upko's launch was a boost for Dompok after the party's dismal performance in the March 12-13, 1999, State election.

Of the party's 11 candidates, including nine incumbent assemblymen, only two - Datuk Wences Anggang (Kuala Penyu) and Datuk Siringan Gubat (Ranau) - managed to retain their seats.

Dompok, who was then Chief Minister, lost in Moyog, as did the party's deputy president Datuk Wilfred Mojilip Bumburing in Tamparuli.

Gubat, who is Upko information chief, said although the party suffered big losses in the State election, an analysis of the results showed that votes secured by the party had increased in all the constituencies contested.

Such support for the party was evident in the November general election.

Kadazandusun and Murut support for Upko has not gone unnoticed by the Prime Minister.

Dr Mahathir, in his message in the party's congress souvenir programme, said the Kadazandusun and Murut communities now support Upko as a component of BN.

He said the increase in votes for BN in Upko-contested constituencies Upkawas proof of their confidence in BN.

The Prime Minister said Upko had shown great progress and improvement in representing the Kadazandusun and Murut communities in the BN Government, both at State and Federal level, and would continue to be an active partner.

Dompok formed PDS when the PBS Government collapsed after the March 1994 State election. Its application for registration was approved by the

Registrar of Society on March 21, 1994.

Officially launched on March 27, 1994, the party was admitted into the BN fold on June 11, 1994.

Dompok said development would be among the major issues to be deliberated at today's congress, the first in the new millennium. The party congress' theme last year was "PDS into the new millennium".

For the next two days, Upko leaders and delegates will deliberate the party's achievements since its last gathering, in particular their performance in the November parliamentary election.

Compared to the State election, Upko fared well in the parliamentary election. It was allocated four seats and won three, all formerly held by PBS.

As expected, Dompok wrested Kinabalu from PBS, Wilfred Madius Tangau defeated Yunof Marinking of PBS in Tuaran while Philip Lasimbang was the victor in Penampang.

Apart from three MPs, two elected and a nominated assemblyman, Upko also has its Wanita chief Datuk Christine Tibok Van Houten as a member of the Dewan Negara (Senator).

Being well-represented in the BN Government, it is incumbent upon Upko leaders to steer the welfare of the Kadazandusun and Murut communities to make them at par with the other races.

Dompok said today's congress is an avenue to chart the people's future and to seek ways to get the Kadazandusun and Murut communities involved in the mainstream of development.

"Over the past five years, Upko had developed into a strong component of BN. We have seen the party's development from scratch.

"Upko is now significant at national level," he said.

While Dompok is in the Federal Cabinet, Upko is represented in the State Cabinet by Bumburing (Deputy Chief Minister), Anggang (Resource Development and Information Technology Minister) and Gubat (Agriculture Development and Information Technology Assistant Minister).

As one of Sabah's political parties championing the welfare of the Kadazandusun and Murut communities through BN, Upko must endeavour to strengthen its base in preparation for the next State election.

In doing so, Upko must remember that the PBS, a Kadazandusun and Murut-based opposition party which won 17 seats in the March 1999 State election, is still a force to be reckoned with in Sabah politics.

The party's leaders and delegates at today's congress must make a solid commitment towards maintaining its strengthening position as the voice of the communities it represents.

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