

# Rethink on Sabah's power-sharing mode

**P**RIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was in a good mood during his recent visit to Sabah. The "old man," as he is fondly referred to by Sabah politicians, smiled as Sabah Umno leaders laughed at Datuk Karim Ghani's jokes while they strolled to a conference room in the Sutera Magellan resort in Kota Kinabalu last Sunday.

Before this, a dinner of *chapati* and mutton curry, which had been specially cooked by a senior Sabah Umno leader for Dr Mahathir, had brought on the cheerful mood.

As he sat down for the closed-door meeting with Sabah Umno liaison committee members and Umno elected representatives, the cheerful atmosphere helped to set the stage for discussions on the prickly topic of the rotation system.

When it was proposed by Dr Mahathir as an election pledge in 1994, the rotation system caught politicians by surprise and even prompted opposition parties to call for rotating the premiership as well.

It was subsequently implemented after Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) lost the majority to form the next state government after the election.

The Prime Minister can dispose of or keep the system, notwithstanding the views of Sabah Umno or any of the eight other state Barisan component parties.

But Dr Mahathir has agreed to listen to all views, and he has till March 18 to decide the way ahead for Sabah.

The decision will be made at a time when rallying cries for Malay and national unity are growing louder in Kuala Lumpur in the shadow of a shrinking economic pie.

Dr Mahathir had mooted the Barisan rotation system — where a Muslim, Chinese and a Kadazandusun leader serves as chief minister for a two-year term — to stop the nine-year political pendulum swing.

The Chinese and non-Muslim bumiputra voters had played a crucial part in determining the fate of the previous Usno, Berjaya and PBS governments, none of which lasted more than nine years in Sabah.

Right from the start, many Sabah Umno leaders had opposed the system which they felt was not practi-

cal. They view it to be unfair to Umno which now holds more than half of the 54 state assembly seats.

In their latest meeting with Dr Mahathir, they did not hide their dissatisfaction with the rotation system before leaving it in his hands to discuss with other Barisan leaders.

"I'm sure it's off," said Karim, the state Umno information chief, after Dr Mahathir left for Kuala Lumpur.

Umno officials said Dr Mahathir had made it clear to them that scrapping the system would mean Sabah Umno would have to make sacrifices for various positions at both state and national level.

"If the rotation is to be scrapped, Dr Mahathir needs the consensus of the component parties. It cannot be forced upon," said an Umno leader who declined to be named.

Sabah Institute of Development Studies executive director Dr Yaakub Johari agreed that changes were required to the rotation system, and that if there was going to be a change it must accommodate all communities.

"Now is the time to work out a long-term solution for confidence-building among the three communities," said Yaakub who held the view that "it is now or never" for a review.

Sabah Abim head Sulaiman Osman also felt that the rotation system was no longer relevant and that all involved should think of a long-term solution.

Dr Mahathir, who said he would decide on the rotation before current Chief Minister Datuk Osu Sukam's term ends, met Osu and other Barisan leaders one by one at his Putrajaya office on Wednesday.

Although several Umno leaders are firm that the rotation be abolished, they are unsure if they want Osu to remain as the Muslim representative in the event that a new

five-year tenure formula is worked out.

The nature of the new formula could also be a sticky issue and Barisan parties have been told by the Prime Minister to make formal proposals about what they want if the rotation system is scrapped.

A triumvirate system is supposed to be one of sharing power among multi-religious, multi-ethnic Malaysians, and more so in Sabah which has about 35 indigenous groups.

When Malaysia was formed, one unwritten understanding for Sabah and Sarawak was that the chief minister and the Yang di-Pertua Negri should preferably be from different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Historically, the triumvirate system was first tried out during the Roman era after the death of Julius Caesar. Three commanders were appointed to take turns to rule the crumbling empire.

By implementing his rotation promise, Dr Mahathir did allay initial fears among non-Muslim voters who felt that power in Sabah would be centred in the hands of peninsula-based Umno or a Muslim leader once Barisan assumed power.

But what is happening in Sabah, where a non-Muslim has a shot at being chief minister just like in Penang, is that a noble thought is turning out to be a comedy of errors in its implementation.

Ask politicians and journalists about the rotation system, and they will jokingly say: "One CM took the hills, one gave away the sea, one signed off the valleys and another bet on watery deals."

They cannot help but compare what veteran politicians say about the Usno-Berjaya-PBS governments: "Usno took the meat of the timber, Berjaya the bones and PBS the crumbs with Barisan looking at leftovers."

Barisan leaders failed to put their heads together and take the opportunity to find the best way the rotation could serve Sabahans.

Instead, they ended up backbiting and sabotaging each other.

The situation in Sabah has become so bad that the five Barisan chief ministers in seven years are perceived by the man on the street as taking and giving everything to their cronies.

For the moment, all nine state Barisan leaders are keeping their thoughts to themselves for fear that a wrong statement may find them facing the wrong end of the Kuala Lumpur stick.

"It's not a straightforward yes or no," said a Kadazandusun party MP as he reflected upon the views of United Pasok Momogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation president Tan Sri Bernard Dompok whose tenure ended abruptly.

Dompok lost the Moyog seat and the chief minister's post to Osu after the March 1999 election.

"What we are looking at is institutionalised fairness, beyond a power-sharing formula of merely rotating the chief minister."

For example, he said: "Look at the Lebanese model where the post of president, prime minister and parliament speaker are divided among Christians, Muslims and Mennonites.

"For us, this should involve appointments to other key posts. We are willing to explore anything to get to the level of satisfaction for all. But the principle has to be right.

"We didn't go to Barisan for the sake of having a chance to become chief minister but rather to be involved in real power-sharing. We want to avoid a pendulum swing."

Dompok had told reporters in Ipoh that Upko would submit a detailed report on the pros and cons of the

rotation system when the parties met Dr Mahathir again.

Sabah Progressive Party president and former chief minister Datuk Yong Teck Lee, who gave up his post to Dompok, said: "We want to see equilibrium in both politics and government, and not necessarily be in the rotation itself."

Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) president Datuk Chong Kah Kiat said that any new formula should be based on unity, stability and continuity.

If the rotation system is continued, LDP is said to have an edge over SAPP whose Chinese representative has served a term. On the Kadazandusun side, the choice seems to favour Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS) rather than Upko as Dompok has also served a term.

PBRS president Tan Sri Joseph Kurup has said that if the rotation continues, there would be fewer problems. But he declined to make any substantial comment until after his meeting with Dr Mahathir.

Hoping that PBRS will be given the opportunity to hold the job is Kurup's deputy Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan who returned to the Barisan fold last April with five assemblymen from opposition PBS (led by his brother Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan).

PBS has consistently maintained that the rotation system is illegal as, under the Sabah Constitution, only a leader who commands the support of the majority should be the chief minister.

Parti Akar president Datuk Pandikar Amin Mulia said the rotation system should be replaced with a full five-year elected term. Other Sabah Barisan components — MCA, MIC and Gerakan — have left the issue in the hands of their respective presidents.

Sabah Umno officials believe that if a new formula is worked out, then Osu might continue as chief minister.

Those who have met the Prime Minister have indicated that he is considering scrapping the rotation system.

Whatever decision Dr Mahathir finally makes will impact on the political scenario of Sabah — and surely put to test Barisan's unity and sincerity.