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Mahathir-Chong

CHONG TAKES OVER FROM OSU AS SABAH CHIEF MINISTER

KUALA LUMPUR, March 16 (Bernama) -- Sabah Tourism Development, Environment, Science and Technology Minister Datuk Chong Kah Kiat will be appointed the new Sabah Chief Minister, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

Dr Mahathir, who is Barisan Nasional (BN) chairman, said that Chong, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) president, would replace Datuk Osu Sukam as the new Sabah Chief Minister under the state's rotation system which would have some minor changes.

"Since Umno is the biggest party in the Sabah government, Umno will get to hold the chief ministership for two terms compared to one term for the non-Muslim Bumiputera parties and the parties representing the Chinese," he told a news conference after chairing the BN Supreme Council meeting at Menara Dato' Onn at the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) here.

Dr Mahathir did not have time to explain the new formula to be implemented as he was rushing for the mosque to perform his Friday prayers.

However, according to Sabah Progressive Party president Datuk Yong Teck Lee, to his understanding, Umno would hold the chief ministership alternatively with the other Sabah BN component parties.

For instance, said Yong, Umno would hold the chief ministership for two years followed by other component parties for another two years. The post will be held again by Umno for two more years before being taken over by other component parties.

Dr Mahathir earlier had a meeting with the Sabah Umno liaison body and met the Sabah BN component party leaders separately at the same venue.

The prime minister also did not say when Chong will take over from Osu.

Dr Mahathir, who is Umno president, said that all the BN component parties had accepted the new formula and would explain it to their respective supporters.

"I've also met the (Sabah) Umno liaison body, they've accepted, I've met the Sabah BN, they've accepted, and the BN (Supreme Council) has also been briefed on this and there are no objections," he said.

The prime minister said that he would hold discussion with Chong on the new Sabah Cabinet line-up which could have some minor changes.

He however did not disclose when the discussion will be held.

The rotation system, when introduced in 1994, provided opportunity for leaders of the three main ethnic groups in Sabah -- Muslim Bumiputeras, non-Muslim Bumiputeras and the Chinese -- to serve as chief minister for a term of two years each.

Some quarters wanted the system to be maintained while others wanted it to be abolished.

The system was mooted by Dr Mahathir during the 1994 Sabah election campaign. It was implemented when the BN recaptured the state government from the opposition on March 17, 1994, almost seven years ago.

The first chief minister under the system was Tun Sakaran Dandai from Umno. Sakaran made way for Datuk Salleh Said Keruak, also from Umno, after he was appointed Sabah's Yang Dipertua Negeri.

Yong later replaced Salleh to take over the slot for the Chinese.

Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, from the United Pasuk Kadazandusun Organisation (Upko), who took over from Yong before the 1999 state election, lost in the election half way through his term and was replaced by Osu, from Umno.

Meanwhile, Chong, 53, told reporters that he was surprised over the

appointment.

"I thank the prime minister and the BN for giving me this huge responsibility.

"My job is to make sure that the BN will continue to be strengthened and I will work with all BN component parties," he said.

Chong, the Kudat state assemblyman, said his appointment was for two years.

He said he would be meeting Dr Mahathir next week on his swearing-in and the new Sabah Cabinet line-up, if any.

Asked when he would be sworn in, Chong said it would only be decided after his meeting with Dr Mahathir.

On the changes to the rotation system to give Umno a two-year term at the chief ministership, Chong said: "It is new and I hope Umno will take over again after this. After that, election will be held.

"The bottom line is every race, community has a role. It is not a question of changing seats...we have a role to play. The point (I am trying to make) is that all the (BN) component parties can contribute positively (to strengthen BN's position)," he said.

-- BERNAMA

AFY MAM AT ZS RM