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Akar-Sayonara (News Focus)

GUESSING GAME OVER AKAR IS OVER

By: Newmond Tibin

KOTA KINABALU, May 20 (Bernama) -- The uncertainty over the future of the Angkatan Keadilan Rakyat (Akar) has come to a dramatic end with its members bidding "sayonara" to the 12-year-old party and applying to join Umno en bloc here today.

Before this, it was unclear as to what direction its president Datuk Pandikar Amin Mulia was heading after the delegates at the party's congress last year gave him the mandate to decide the future direction of the party.

It was widely speculated then that Akar, one of the Sabah Barisan Nasional (BN) component parties, might close shop but it did not materialise immediately.

Instead, three months later, in what is seen as a change of stand, Pandikar Amin threw back the dice to the members of the supreme council to make the final decision.

That was seen as a signal that the party might not be dissolved or close shop after all and since then, the issue became a guessing game for everybody particularly the political pundits.

In fact, before the congress on Nov 25, last year, the Akar president had said that "politics is the art of the possible".

True enough Pandikar Amin's pendulum of opinion has swung in favour of dissolution.

"After giving it serious thought for months, I conveyed my decision (to dissolve) to the delegates yesterday," he said in his speech at the Akar special assembly here.

He said the decision was reached after taking into account all factors including the party's strength in Sabah.

"The Akar struggle had been like sailing in the high seas with all its challenges and as the trusted captain, I have the responsibility to ensure that the cargo safely reached its destination," he said.

"I am aware and acknowledge that the expertise of the "Pandikar Kampung" the captain is limited. Hence we have to be in a big ship or party to ensure the future of its members," he said.

The much-awaited decision was officially announced by Prime Minister and BN Chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad when opening the Akar assembly.

Dr Mahathir also welcomed former Akar members including the Chinese to join Umno, the backbone of the government of the day. Later, the Prime Minister received the membership applications from them to join Umno.

With the eclipse of Akar in the Sabah political arena, the Sabah BN component strength is reduced to eight with Umno being the pillar as was evident in the last state election.

The other Sabah BN component parties are Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS), Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP), Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), United Pasok Momogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO), Gerakan, MCA and MIC.

Akar, which had more than 30,000 members, was founded in September 1989 by former leaders of the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) including Pandikar Amin.

The others being former Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Mark Koding, Datuk Dr Jeffry Kitingan, Datuk Kalakau Untol and Datuk George Sangkin.

In its 12 years of existence, the party won only one seat, Tempasuk, in the 1994 state election. The Tempasuk assemblyman Pandikar Amin, was then made State Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Pandikar did not seek re-election in Tempasuk in the last state election and gave way to an Umno candidate. He was then made a senator and the Prime Minister included him in the Federal Cabinet as Minister in the Prime Minister's Department.

Speaking to reporters later, Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Chong Kah Kiat said Pandikar's decision to dissolve the party and its members joining Umno en bloc was appropriate as it would contribute to unity.

On Umno's readiness to accept non-Bumiputeras into its fold, the Chief Minister said, "We leave it to Umno and I'm sure the party has the mechanism to deal with this matter. If they want to join Umno en-bloc...we welcome them and if they join other component parties they are free to do so."

Several other Sabah BN component party leaders also echoed the same sentiments.

PBRs president Tan Sri Joseph Kurup said Akar's dissolution was done for the good of the party.

"However, I'd like to stress here that PBRs's door is always open for any member of the party who wants to join us," he said.

SAPP President Datuk Yong Teck Lee said Umno's willingness to accept Chinese into the party would not affect the Chinese-based BN component parties but instead it would make BN grow even stronger.

Yong said Pandikar Amin's decision to dissolve Akar was expected because the speculation to that effect had been around for quite some time.

"Malaysia is a democratic country and Akar is free to decide its future," Yong said.

UPKO Secretary General Datuk Wences Anggang concurred with Yong saying UPKO respected the decision of the Akar Supreme Council.

-- BERNAMA

NT AAM