

08 FEB 2001

Sabah-Rotation (News Focus)

MAHATHIR BRINGING ANSWER TO SABAH CM'S ROTATION RIDDLE

By: Jackson Sawatan

KOTA KINABALU, Feb 8 (Bernama) -- There is a strong conviction that when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad visits Sabah this weekend he will bring along the answer to the riddle about the future of the rotation system for Sabah's chief ministership.

With two months left before the tenure of the current Chief Minister Datuk Osu Sukam expires, local political observers wished that Dr Mahathir would at least give a hint as what the future holds for the unique system.

When reporters approached him on the matter while on a brief stop-over enroute to Kuala Lumpur from Osaka last month, Dr Mahathir said: "I haven't made up my mind."

So the guessing game goes on.

On the one hand there is nothing definite that the system will be continued and on the other, if it were to be retained, who then would be appointed after Osu?

A yet another proposal came up yesterday calling for the abolition of the system, this time around from an action front calling itself Cintanusa, short for Kumpulan Belia Pencinta Nusa, which claimed that most Sabahans were no longer in favour of a rotating chief ministership.

Cintanusa said it would submit to the Yang Dipertua Negeri Tun Sakaran Dandai a memorandum to back its demand for the abolition of the system and a similar one to Dr Mahathir this weekend.

"The feedback we received so far indicate that the majority of Sabahans reject the rotating chief ministership," said Cintanusa chairman Zulkarnain Mahdar.

The system, introduced by the Barisan Nasional when it formed the state government in 1994, enables leaders of Sabah's three main communities -- the Muslim Bumiputera, the Chinese and the non-Muslim Bumiputera -- to lead the state government for a two-year term.

There seems to be a similarity in the political backdrop for the prime minister's visit this weekend with the one he made on May 7 1998 when there were two weeks left before the expiry of chief ministership term for the Chinese community represented by Datuk Yong Teck Lee then.

While it was then definite that the system would be continued, the lingering riddle at that time was who among two Kadazandusun leaders would succeed Yong.

Sabah Democratic Party (now UPKO) president Tan Sri Bernard Dompok and Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRs) president Datuk Joseph Kurup (now Tan Sri) were the two names mentioned then as both have the edge.

Dompok's advantage was the PDS having 11 assemblymen in the state legislature while Kurup's was his seniority in the state Cabinet as he was already deputy chief minister.

Although at a packed press conference later Dr Mahathir made an anti-climax announcement "I will not announce the name of the new Chief Minister today", the riddle was answered a week later when Dompok, now Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, was picked for the chief ministership over Kurup.

Should the system be retained upon expiry of the current turn for the Muslim Bumiputera community, the incoming chief minister should again come from the Kadazandusun.

Given this backdrop, local political observers predicted a replay of the 1998 "Dompok or Kurup" riddle, only this time, they said there could be

a reversal of fortune for the PBRs.

Between UPKO and PBRs, the latter now has, in turn, more assemblymen after Bingkor assemblyman Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan and five others joined the party recently.

UPKO in turn has a senior leader in the state cabinet in Datuk Wilfred Bumburing who is currently Deputy Chief Minister.

This tends to lend credence to the reversal of fortune theory on account of the PBRs's stronger representation in the state legislature, according to the reckoning of local political observers and analysts.

So, will Sabahans see a PBRs leader occupying the hot chief minister's seat this time around after Osu completes his tenure?

Dr Mahathir's visit this weekend may or may not give the answer.

But his scheduled meeting on Sunday with the state Umno liaison committee, though a routine one as was in past visits, has generated intense anxiety.

More so because, one source has forecast that it will be of special significance than past meetings.

-- BERNAMA

JS RYN