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Pairin: We need to work together

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FOR someone who had once stood up against the likes of former Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Harris Salleh who is known for his temper, Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan does not look like a "tough politician".

And for someone who had been accused by Barisan Nasional component party leaders as a back-stabber, the Parti Bersatu Sabah president's mild mannerisms are definitely misleading.

Met barely three hours after he handed to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad PBS' application to rejoin the BN, Pairin was his usual self - smiling and joking with the party's supreme council members who had come down to Kuala Lumpur to be with him.

The cosy ambience of the Chinese restaurant in a hotel in the capital witnessed the closeness and camaraderie shared between Pairin and the PBS council members.

But the atmosphere did not belie the fact that Pairin was the Hu guan Siou (paramount leader).

And there was something very telling in the confines of the reserved room of the restaurant - everyone, Pairin included, seemed very relieved. When asked, Pairin was quick to answer: "Oh yes, very much relieved."

On his side, his deputy Dr Maximus Ongkili nodded in agreement, a gesture noticeably shown by some 20 other PBS leaders and friends who had joined the dinner.

It is not surprising that such relief was felt. After all, the PBS had gone through a long and winding political trail since it left the BN three days before the October 1990 general election.

In the 1994 Sabah election, Pairin saw how his assemblymen who won their seats on the PBS ticket and secured the State rule, abandoned him and handed the State Government to BN.

Since then, no one would dare to bet on PBS returning to power even if the party managed to secure the majority of seats in the State legislative assembly, believing that the elected representatives would just cross over to their opposing camps as they did in 1994.

It was a relief too because the application to rejoin BN finally became a reality after nearly six months of negotiations and bargaining.

In the interview, Pairin, despite his earlier reluctance to have it, was prepared to take on any questions.

All the answers seemed to fall into place.

"Off the record" stuff would have enlightened most on why the PBS pulled out in 1990 and the need for it to return to the fold now.

But Pairin did not want them recorded, at least for now, either to avoid hurting other parties or keeping them as his aces in the future.

Regardless, Pairin is aware that there will be opposition to the planned return to BN, be it from within the PBS or from component parties in the BN.

But he seemed prepared to take the risk - either because he has nothing more to lose or that he truly believes that the move is the best for the party and the people of Sabah.

At the end of it all, one can expect him to remain unperturbed. Pairin, as politician or otherwise, is a man who loves living life to the fullest.