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PBS to debate return to BN fold

KOTA KINABALU, Mon. - Delegates to the Parti Bersatu Sabah's 16th annual congress will debate on whether or not the party should apply to rejoin the Barisan Nasional which it abandoned in 1990.

Opening the congress at the Hongkod Koisaan in Penampang, near here today, PBS president Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan said he expected delegates to openly and sincerely give their views on the matter.

The PBS abruptly pulled out from the BN on the eve of the 1990 Parliamentary election, claiming that it had been unfairly treated throughout its affiliation with the BN.

Questions about the PBS applying to re-enter the BN have been milling around for two years after it failed to unseat the BN Government in the 1999 State election.

Pairin said questions about PBS rejoining the BN were probably being asked because of the party's moderate and liberal stance and also the fact that it did not join the Opposition Front.

The PBS president said he was often confronted with the question of whether the PBS wanted to rejoin the BN. "It was not easy for me to answer such questions because whatever I say only gives rise to speculation and perceptions."

As such, Pairin said, to enable the party leadership to get feedback from the people, he decided to touch on the matter so that the delegates can debate on it.

He said the PBS leadership would respect and take into account the views and advice from the delegates to enable it to decide on the future direction of the party.

The PBS leadership has of late been making statements deemed "reconciliatory" in nature to the BN, heightening the possibility of a return to its fold.

Talk about the PBS rejoining the BN intensified when Pairin attended this year's Government-organised State-level Harvest Festival officiated by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

It was learnt that Pairin and his deputy, Dr Maximus Ongkili, met Abdullah twice on the matter.

The PBS leadership was also said to have held several meetings with Datuk Johari Baharum, the political secretary of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Asked, after the congress, if it was true that the PBS leadership had met with BN leaders on the matter, Pairin quipped, "We always meet them (BN leaders) in Parliament.

"It has always been a subject matter. We cannot run away from the question and therefore we might as well get it debated."

This is the first time that delegates would be debating the issue and a resolution to give Pairin the mandate to decide on the matter is expected to be passed at the congress.

The PBS supreme council is expected to convene a meeting on Friday to deliberate on the decision of the delegates.

"Whatever the decision by the delegates would be considered by the supreme council," Pairin said.

The PBS came to power in 1985 when it toppled the Berjaya Government and was returned to power in a snap election in 1986 and the State elections of 1990 and 1994.

However, the PBS Government collapsed a month after the 1994 State election when several of its assemblymen defected to the BN.

In the 1999 State election, the PBS won 17 of the 48 seats in the assembly but now they have only nine assemblymen after eight defected to the BN.

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