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Political stability and unity to gain with return of PBS from the cold

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A "PRODIGAL son" who has realised his mistake and wants to return to the right path would best describe opposition Parti Bersatu Sabah's decision to apply to rejoin the Barisan Nasional.

Being out in the cold for 11 years after abruptly abandoning the BN on the eve of the 1990 parliamentary election, PBS, after some soul-searching, has finally accepted it was wrong to leave the BN.

Its abrupt decision to quit the BN was attacked by many as "stabbing the BN in the back".

The realisation that it would be difficult, if not impossible, for it to wrest control of the State from the BN could have prompted a change of heart by the PBS leadership.

It had been downhill all the way for the PBS after it retained the State Government by the slimmest majority in the 1994 State election only to be toppled from power a month later by the defection of several of its assemblymen to the BN.

The PBS failed in its attempt to make a comeback in the 1999 State election, winning only 17 of the 48 seats compared to the 25 it won in 1994.

In the 1999 parliamentary election, it picked up only three seats, out of the 20 at stake in Sabah. Even party president Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan, once impregnable in his Keningau stronghold, scraped through by just over 500 votes.

Despite its dwindling number of seats, PBS remained a force to be reckoned with in Sabah politics because it was acknowledged to enjoy considerable grassroots support, especially among the Kadazandusuns.

What would the PBS' return to the BN mean?

If re-admitted, the PBS, with nine assemblymen (following the defection of eight to BN component members) and three MPs, will be the second largest BN party in Sabah after Umno.

To be sure, PBS' return to the BN will strengthen the unity of the people and ensure political stability.

Intense politicking, constant bickering and disunity in the past had obstructed efforts to expedite development in the State.

Co-operation from all quarters is necessary to ensure that all segments of the community, especially those in the rural areas, benefit from the various development programmes.

There are already positive signs that the State BN Government and the Opposition are able to work together in the interest of the State and the people.

This was seen by the adoption of a motion tabled by PBS deputy president Dr Maximus Ongkili at the State Legislative Assembly middle of this year on the formation of an ad hoc all-party committee to resolve the illegal immigrants problem.

The PBS leadership had also openly supported Government policies and programmes which it deemed good for the nation and the people.

The PBS re-admission into the BN will significantly contribute to the effort to unite the Kadazandusuns and the diverse ethnic groups in the State.

The two Kadazandusun-based parties in the BN, United Pasok Momogun Kadazandusun Organisation (Upko) and Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRs), have been talking about a merger and it would be interesting to see how

the PBS fits into such a scenario if it is accepted into the BN.

Pairin had said that the PBS could not participate in such a discussion because it is a multi-racial party and not a component member of the BN.

Observers have also raised the issue of whether Upko and PBRs, which were formed by PBS dissident leaders after the collapse of the PBS Government in 1994, will support PBS' application to rejoin the BN.

By convention, a consensus by all the 13 BN component members is required when accepting a new member into the coalition.

But if the statements by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and other BN leaders that the BN will consider the PBS application are any indication, the PBS could look forward to a positive response.

Political leaders of the various Sabah parties would be expected to consider the best interests of the Kadazandusun community and the other ethnic groups when the time comes to decide.

Nevertheless, doubts about PBS' sincerity still remain. To overcome them, it would be necessary for PBS not to set any condition for its re-admission. That, as Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has put it, is the only condition for the BN to consider the PBS request to return to the fold.

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