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## Political vicissitudes

M Shanmugam

SABAH'S political landscape is in for another shift, judging from the appointment of Datuk Chong Kah Kiat as Chief Minister (CM), and the emergence of several Umno leaders in the state Cabinet.

Given that Chong, the leader of minnows Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) which has all of two state seats, was never a serious contender for the chief ministership, the appointment must have come as a pleasant surprise. Nevertheless, he is probably the best candidate to stabilise the various power bases within the Barisan Nasional (BN) in Sabah at the moment.

Sources say that incumbent CM Datuk Osu Sukam of Umno was confident the rotation system would be scrapped. The strongest hint for the 52-year-old lawyer, say aides, was probably the comment by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that the rotation system had brought about a lame-duck CM. But eventually, the spirit of the BN prevailed, and Dr Mahathir, true to his style, pulled a surprise by naming Chong as the new CM.

It is no secret that the majority of members within Umno Sabah are not in favour of the rotation system. It is learnt that in early March, 12 out of the 20 division leaders in Sabah, a Youth and a Wanita division head had handed a memorandum to Dr Mahathir, who is also the Umno president, expressing their reservations about the rotation system.

Although Osu has been the state Umno liaison committee chairman since December 1996, sources say he has not been able to wield sufficient influence in the party. A Federal Minister for 12 years, he was appointed Deputy CM in the Sabah State Cabinet in June 1998, returning to Sabah to replace Datuk Abdul Ghapur Salleh who declined re-appointment as Deputy CM when Tan Sri Bernard Dompok took over as CM.

After the Umno-powered BN swept to power in the 1999 state elections, Osu was the natural choice for CM. Perhaps his best showing was leading the BN to win 17 of the 20 seats during the parliamentary elections in November 1999. The convincing victory left the opposition Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) dazzled.

But his feat at the BN level was in stark contrast to his influence in the state Umno, which is basically divided into two main categories - members who were previously aligned to Berjaya and members who disbanded United Sabah National Organisation (Usno) to join Umno.

Usno's founding member, the late Tun Datu Mustapha Datu Harun, was the prime mover in getting Umno to set foot in Sabah. Mustapha, a fatherly figure to Usno, was the first assemblyman to join Umno in February 1991. Osu was among the group who followed him. When Osu was made CM, he was looked upon as Mustapha's replacement. Besides Osu, the other old guards from Usno are Datuk Karim Ghani and Datuk Seri Panglima Ampong Puyon, the division head of Sandakan.

Usno's style of politics, however, is different from Berjaya's. Datuk Salleh Said Keruak, the former CM, leads the pack of Umno members who had their political origins in Berjaya. Salleh, a district officer in the 1980s, quit to contest the Usukan state seat under Berjaya. He lost and later left Berjaya to join PBS.

After the 1990 state elections, where he lost the Usukan seat again, Salleh was appointed a nominated assemblyman by PBS. However, he quit the party a year later to join Umno when the party made its entry into Sabah. Besides Ghapur, Datuk Musa Aman is also linked to Salleh. When Osu was CM, only Musa was in the Cabinet.

Under Chong, however, all three are in the state Cabinet. This explains why many feel that Chong has a strong team to back him up despite the fact that the LDP only has two seats. 'One thing I can say for sure is that Chong has lined up one of the most experienced Cabinets,' says SAPP's Member of Parliament for Tawau, Shim Pau Fatt.

The ties between Chong and Salleh go back to their Berjaya days of the 1980s. Chong's appointment of Tan Sri Joseph Kurup as Deputy CM is also seen as a move to appease the Kadazandusun, in particular, Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRs).

A few months before Osu's term was up, six assemblymen from PBS left to join PBRs. The move is said to have strengthened PBRs' case for the chief ministership. Before the 1999 state elections, Dompok, representing the Kadazandusun, served as CM for a mere 10 months. He lost in the state elections to PBS stalwart Datuk Clarence Bongkos Malakun and consequently, the Kadazandusun lost the chief ministership.

But the strong support of the community for the BN in the 1999 parliamentary elections rekindled hopes that a Kadazandusun might be made CM. However, this was not to be the case. Closer scrutiny sheds some light.

First, under the rotation system thus far, after the Muslim Bumiputera candidate has served his term, the next candidate for the CM's post would come from the Chinese community. In the previous tenure, Datuk Yong Teck Lee of SAPP took over the chief ministership from Salleh.

Also, PBRs' numbers in the Sabah state assembly are made up of members who won under the PBS ticket. This group of assemblymen, led by Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan, did not defect to PBRs immediately after the state elections of 1999. They only made their move a few months before talk of a new CM surfaced. 'It would seem as though they saw a possible window of opportunity and jumped into PBRs to make use of it. But in the end, it was Chong who was made CM,' says an Umno leader.

True to the political shenanigans of Sabah, Chong did not have a smooth passage to the chief ministership. A suit filed to prevent the Yang Dipertua Negeri from swearing Chong in had to be set aside, and Chong, allegedly, had to garner written support from state assemblymen on the eve of the swearing in ceremony in an episode which lasted until the wee hours of the morning.

Osu's aides deny that there was an attempt to scuttle Chong's swearing in ceremony. They also deny any involvement in the legal suit. Three businessmen, two from the Kota Belud Umno Division, filed the suit. Incidentally, Salleh, the Deputy CM, is also the division head.

Musli Oli, the spokesman for the three, denies allegations that they are backed by some influential figure, saying, 'Nobody is backing us. We raised RM3,000 on our own to file the suit.'

But is this the end of Chong's travails? Hardly. Datuk James Ghani, the lawyer for the three businessmen, confirms that they are continuing efforts to file a suit on the interpretation of the Sabah Constitution, pertaining to the appointment of the CM. According to the constitution, the Yang DiPertua Negeri shall appoint, as CM, a member of the state assembly who is likely to command the confidence of the majority of members in the assembly. The constitution also states that where a political party has won the majority seats, the leader of that party is likely to command the confidence of the assembly.

Whether the suit is successful or not is left to be seen, but the rotation system mooted by Dr Mahathir in 1994 has played a major part in seeing the BN overcome PBS' hold on the state.

While the bigger political parties like PBS and Umno may be disadvantaged by the rotation system, smaller Chinese-based parties, who

were, incidentally, decision makers of past state elections, favour such a system because it gives them a brief spell at the helm of the state. And if the parliamentary elections of November 1999 are anything to go by, even the Kadazandusun, who predominantly support PBS, are beginning to see some light in the rotation system.

But Sabah is known for its political swings. The rotation system is continuing with some modification. Under the present system, the Muslim Bumiputera candidate alternates with non-Muslim Bumiputera and Chinese candidates. This would mean that post-Chong, a candidate from Umno will be CM, followed by a non-Umno candidate.

But will the rotation system last that long?

The answer lies two years away in 2003 when the next state elections are slated to be held. Whether the modified rotation system is acceptable or not will be clearly known then. Until then, the political landscape favours those in the Sabah Cabinet at present.

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