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Practice of CM rotation may not be serving any worthwhile cause

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THE frequent change of Government in Sabah has been cited as one of the main reasons why it has been lagging behind the other States in Malaysia.

Such a contention, perhaps, does hold water as different Governments have different policies, objectives and priorities.

Since the first State election in Sabah in 1967, the State Government has changed hands four times.

Sabah was under the Usno-led Alliance between 1967 and 1976, Berjaya Government (1976-1985), Parti Bersatu Sabah (1985-1994) and Barisan Nasional from 1994 to date.

But it must also be noted that Usno, Berjaya and PBS were at one time members of the BN until the parties were expelled from the grouping for allegedly going against the interest of the national coalition.

In fact, when Berjaya was in power, Usno, although also a member of the BN, was in the opposition at State level. Such was Sabah's unique political situation.

It was this unique political situation that led to the introduction of the system to rotate the Chief Ministership among the three main communities in Sabah - Muslim Bumiputera, non-Muslim Bumiputera (Kadazandusun) and Chinese - every two years.

The system was introduced when the BN took over the State administration from the opposition PBS in 1994.

If the frequent changes in Government are blamed for Sabah's current state of development, what about the frequent changes of Chief Minister under the rotation system?

Some quarters, particularly the opposition, have claimed that the rotation system was disruptive to the State administration and had resulted in political uncertainties.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said recently that the two-year rotation had created a series of "lame duck" Chief Ministers and had lead to an ineffective State Government.

PBS deputy president Dr Maximus Ongkili claimed that the rotation system promotes "wastages, inefficiencies, abuses and discontinuities in policy and administration".

While agreeing that the rotation system has its weaknesses, State BN leaders feel that it (the rotation) also has its strengths and that whatever shortcomings there may be could be addressed.

"Although the rotation system had its strengths and weaknesses, for seven years, it had been deemed a suitable formula to cater to Sabah's unique political situation," said Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) president Datuk Yong Teck Lee.

Yong's SAPP is one of the nine component members of the State BN, the others being Umno, United Pasok Momongun Kadazandusun-Murut Organisation, Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah, Liberal Democratic Party, Angkatan Keadilan Rakyat, MCA, Gerakan and MIC.

What is important, said Yong, was for the concept of consultation, consensus building and being sensitive to the needs and fears of all communities to be given paramount importance.

The question of "being sensitive to the needs and fears of all communities" is, of course, very much relevant because of the racial composition of the State which is made up of more than 30 ethnic groups.

Although the rotation system does not involve a revamp in government

policies and objectives, it could not be denied that different Chief Ministers would have different emphases and priorities.

Former Chief Minister Datuk Salleh Said had once remarked that two years was a short period and that although the BN Government's development policy was clear, "different Chief Ministers have different emphases and approaches".

But for UPKO president Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, rotating the Chief Ministership every two years was not a hindrance to develop the State.

He contended that in a system where there is frequent changes at the top, the Cabinet would have to be the strongest point for continuity.

"The State Cabinet should be enhanced to ensure the effectiveness of the rotation system," Dompok said.

PBRS deputy president Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan agrees with Dr Mahathir that the two-year tenure under the rotation system had resulted in an ineffective State Government as the Chief Minister had insufficient time to implement his plans effectively.

In this respect, he said a solution could be to extend the tenure of the Chief Ministership from two to five years.

He also suggested that the Chief Ministership in Sabah be modelled on Penang's system where "the majority rules" formula did not apply.

There has also been a contention that the momentum of development in Sabah could not be maintained because of the frequent changes of the leadership in the State.

Assistant Minister to the Chief Minister Datuk Abdul Rahim Ismail, who is Papar Umno deputy chief, said the rotation system had posed many problems for the long-term development of the State.

He claimed that it had also dampened the confidence of the people in State leadership.

"Each new Chief Minister has to source for new funds to implement development projects and this would cause delays," said Rahim.

He is among those who support the scrapping of the system and calling for long-term development policies to ensure the growth of the State.

The issue on the effectiveness of the rotation system had also caught the attention of past leaders, including former Chief Minister Datuk Harris Salleh.

"The rotation has created many problems in the field of development and has retarded the State's progress due to some instances of abuse of power," said Harris, who was Sabah Chief Minister when Berjaya was in power.

The PBS had suggested that an ideal solution to the rotation issue is to have a fresh election and give the job of Chief Minister to the party which wins the most number of seats.

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