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Readmission of PBS to the BN good for unity, stability in Sabah

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JUDGING from the positive reactions of all the Barisan Nasional component parties, Parti Bersatu Sabah seems set to be readmitted into the national coalition.

Perhaps, the BN component parties had taken the cue from the response of Prime Minister and BN chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi regarding PBS' application.

Pairin submitted the PBS application to rejoin the BN, which it abruptly abandoned on the eve of the 1990 parliamentary general elections, to Dr Mahathir on Nov 15.

Dr Mahathir's willingness to forgive Pairin and the PBS for "back stabbing the BN" and Pairin's readiness to admit the party's mistake of pulling out from the BN, could have prompted all the BN component parties to welcome back the PBS into the BN with open arms.

While the PBS had expected BN component parties outside Sabah to support its application, the party had kept its fingers crossed that the three parties in Sabah formed by PBS dissident leaders would do the same.

Another Sabah-based party, the Liberal Democratic Party, led by Chief Minister Datuk Chong Kah Kiat, was the first to support the PBS readmission into the BN.

The three parties - United Pasok Momogun Kadadazandusun-Murut Organisation (Upko), Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRs) and the Sabah Progressive Party (Sapp) - have been the PBS biggest political rivals.

It was this fierce political rivalry that had caused disunity among the people in Sabah, especially among the Kadazandusun and Chinese communities.

Despite their rivalry, sensibility prevailed and in the interest of the State and the people, the three parties had declared their support to the PBS application.

Upko, which is headed by another former PBS deputy president Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, and PBRs, led by former PBS secretary-general Joseph Kurup, were, in fact, among the first to declare that they had no objection to PBS' readmission.

The Sapp was the last Sabah BN component member to pledge support for the PBS application to rejoin the BN.

After keeping mum for several days, Sapp president Datuk Yong Teck Lee, a PBS deputy president before forming the party just before the 1994 State election, said his party will support the PBS application.

When Dr Mahathir said that a 100 per cent consensus from all the 13 BN component parties was needed for the PBS application to be approved, all eyes were on the Sapp which at that time was the only party which had yet to make a stand on the matter.

Besides supporting the PBS re-entry into the BN, Upko went a step further by proposing a unity talk with PBRs and the PBS.

"It would be in the best interest of the Kadazandusun, Murut and other ethnic groups in Sabah if the three parties are united," said Dompok, who is Minister in the Prime Minister's Department.

Many believe that the proposed unity talk was intended to eventually lead to a merger of the three parties.

Upko and PBRs had, in fact, already begun holding informal discussions on the possibility of a merger.

But it remains to be seen if PBS would agree to a merger because unlike

Upko and PBRS, which are both Kadazandusun-based parties, the PBS is, based on its constitution, a multiracial party.

"I can't see how we can fit into such a merger talk because PBS is a multiracial party," said its deputy president Dr Maximus Ongkili.

Although seen as a Kadazandusun-based party, the PBS is known to have considerable support from the Chinese and the Muslim Bumiputera as evident from the outcome of the 1999 State and parliamentary elections.

A political observer said if Upko and PBRS are all for a merger, the best solution was for the two parties to disband and rejoin the PBS.

"Afterall, they (Upko and PBRS leaders) were once together in PBS," said the observer, adding that the two parties should take the cue from the PBS who was willing to swallow its pride and apply to rejoin the BN.

However, it has to be acknowledged that for Upko, it would not be easy for it to disband as it had proven to a certain extent that it enjoyed quite a considerable support.

This was evident from its achievement in winning the Kuala Penyu and Ranau State seats, and the Kinabalu, Penampang and Kinabalu parliamentary seats in the last 1999 State and parliamentary elections.

But the same cannot be said for PBRS as it had failed to win a single seat in the two elections.

The PBRS' only distinction was its success in attracting six PBS Assemblymen to defect to the party and elevate it as the second largest BN component member in the State.

Some of the defectors, who have been branded as political frogs, have been quick to cite the PBS' decision to rejoin the BN to justify their action to defect to the BN via the PBRS.

Whatever argument there may be on the issue, their defections could well be the last if PBS was readmitted into the BN.

"In a way, the readmission of the PBS into the BN will put an end to the 'frog leaping' of Assemblymen," said Ongkili.

While Sabahans keenly await the proposed unity talk between Upko, PBRS and PBS to become a reality, all eyes are, for now, focussed on the outcome of the PBS' application to rejoin the BN.

PBS' readmission into the BN would be a perfect Hari Raya and Christmas present for all Malaysians, particularly the people of Sabah, who want unity and political stability to prevail in the State.

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