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Sabah-Rotation (News Analysis)

SABAH'S POLITICAL "WHEEL OF FORTUNE" GAME

By: Jackson Sawatan

KOTA KINABALU, Feb 21 (Bernama) -- The rotation of the Sabah chief minister's post can be likened to the popular television "Wheel of Fortune" show.

Both are about things that rotate.

While the game show is about spinning a wheel, the other is about the rotation of the state's chief executive post among leaders of major communities.

As in the popular game show, the rotation system in Sabah also comprises of three "players" from the Muslim Bumiputera, Chinese and non-Muslim Bumiputera communities whose leader will take turns to head the state government for a two-year term each.

But unlike the game show however, where the players may need to spin the wheel many times in order to get enough clues to find out the answer to a question, the Sabah rotation system has only been rotated four times -- twice for the Muslim Bumiputera and one each for the Chinese and the non-Muslim Bumiputera.

Although the second round of the system has yet to be completed, some say most of the clues as to whether the system is really good for Sabah or not, is already noticeable.

Well informed audience and Sabah political observers have by now seen enough clues to make their own guess on whether the system is good or bad, even without spinning the wheel further.

The question now is whether the players will still go for that one final spin, so that more clues can be obtained, or to read out the answer right there and then.

Just like in the game show, another spin can mean a possible extension of the system's usefulness. Then again, if the system was bad, as claimed by many of its critics, then an extra spin can also heighten the risk of prolonging an untenable system.

Assistant Minister to the Chief Minister Datuk Abdul Rahim Ismail said: "The system has posed a lot of problems for the long-term development of the state because of the frequent changes at the helm of the state's administration."

The unique arrangement was mooted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during the 1994 Sabah state elections campaign period and was implemented when the Barisan Nasional (BN) took over the state government on March 17, 1994.

Dr Mahathir said then that it would give all the major communities in Sabah a chance to head the government.

He was quoted as having said, "This is the first time we are giving an assurance that a Chinese can become a Chief Minister...it might not be for long term but it would be the same for the Bumiputera.

"So if it is going to be six years (to complete one round of rotation), victory must be given to BN at the end of every five years when elections are held".

The rotation system, which saw a rapid succession of chief ministers in the past seven years, was done in the hope of dispelling the feeling of one ethnic group being victimised every time a new government is formed.

A former Chief Minister, who served under the system, said the rotation does have its merits because it frees the state from what he terms as "the curse of the pendulum swing" that occurs when changes took place in the

government every nine or 10 years.

"Everytime the pendulum swings from one direction to another, it causes great damage to the opposite side...likewise, everytime there are changes in the government, it created anxiety to certain groups of people," he said.

The well-intentioned arrangement however has its weaknesses, as pointed out by Dr Mahathir himself last week. The system tends to create a series of lame- duck chief ministers.

"The people do not care much with what he does as they are just waiting for him to be replaced by someone else," Dr Mahathir said.

On the other hand, the system also causes the rise and fall of a chief minister, making him virtually unemployed after his two-year term ends despite the fact that the government he helped set up was still very much in power.

Now the question is whether there is a need to continue or to scrap the system that appears to have divided the people of Sabah into at least three segments -- the opposer and defender of the system as well as those who will accept whatever decision made by the Prime Minister.

In what seems to be the final push for the system to continue, a divisional leader of a BN component party said if the system was to be scrapped, it should be done appropriately after the next state elections, due in early 2004.

"Let us make a full circle of the second round of the system," he said.

The mood in Sabah now is one of wanting to see the final decision on the matter being made immediately because all the clues are there and the only thing that needs to be done now is to read out the answer.

"Our stand is the rotation should be scrapped and we have already sent a memorandum to the Prime Minister last year," Sabah Umno Youth Chief Tawfiq Abu Bakar Titingan said.

With all the pros and cons of the system being adequately debated and heard time and again, the fate of the system now lies in the written views and suggestions by Sabah BN component leaders, to be presented to Dr Mahathir within days from now.

The manner in which the rotation is being debated lately is in itself something unprecedented and this could very well signal that a surprise is in store over the future of the system.

Angkatan Keadilan Rakyat (Akar) President Datuk Pandikar Amin Mulia said, "Let me put it this way...if a system is not effective and won't do any good to Sabah and the people, then it ought to be changed."

The future of the rotation system is still a question mark. But what is at stake here is Sabah's political stability which is closely linked to whether the system is good or bad.

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