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Sabah's changing landscape

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PARTI Bersatu Sabah's (PBS) impending re-entry into the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition has triggered speculation on the next state elections. The elections are not due until 2004 but many are predicting the Sabah State Assembly will be dissolved in March 2003 when the two-year term of Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Chong Kah Kiat ends.

The common link between PBS' impending re-entry and speculation on the Sabah state elections boils down to the unique rotation system of appointing the Chief Minister. The system, although strengthening the Sabah BN, has ruffled feathers among the dominant parties in Sabah.

Once PBS does indeed get back into the BN fold, many feel the significance of the rotation system will diminish as there will no longer be any credible opposition in the state. The fight will be among BN component parties, just like the present situation in Sarawak.

An Umno division head says that without an opposition, the rotation system serves little purpose. 'Maybe the BN will revert back to the traditional formula where the leader of the party that wins the most seats will become the chief minister,' he says.

An aide to Chong does not rule out the possibility of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) president continuing as chief minister until the next elections. 'That will resolve the sensitive issue of rotating the chief ministership,' he says.

The rotation system was a well thought out formula introduced in the Sabah BN manifesto during the 1994 state elections. The system essentially allows for power sharing between the various component parties, no matter how many seats they have in the 48-member assembly.

Under the system, representatives from the Bumiputera/Malay, Kadazan/Dusun and Chinese communities will be appointed chief minister for a two-year term. In many ways, the rotation system contributed to breaking PBS' political stranglehold in the state.

The power sharing formula was a vital cog in BN's convincing triumph in the 1999 elections. Powered by Umno, the coalition won 31 out of the 48 seats. Umno won all 24 seats it contested.

It was a far cry from its showing in the dramatic 1994 elections. Then, PBS edged BN by 25 seats to 23 to rule the state. But a stream of defections a few weeks later paved the way for BN to form the government.

Since BN came to power, the rotation system has been the cornerstone of its ability to keep the multi-party coalition intact. In the bitter history of Sabah politics, defections are common. But BN has ruled since 1994 without any major departures. However, by the sheer weight of its 24 seats, the pressure is on the Sabah Umno leaders to press for the abrogation of the rotation system. PBS, which is the dominant Kadazandusun party in the state, has also stated its dislike for the rotation system many times.

There have been instances where the changeover in the chief ministership has been tense. Chong took over from Datuk Osu Sukam, who is from Umno, in March this year. It is believed that the passing of the baton was effected only after some diplomatic mediation by Datuk Abdul Aziz Samsuddin, the deputy Education Minister who is known to be a trusted aide of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. An earlier changeover in the chief ministership from Datuk Mohd Salleh Tun Said Keruak to Datuk Yong Teck Lee in 1996 was also clouded with uncertainty as some Umno leaders in

the state wanted the rotation system scrapped.

However, Dr Mahathir has said repeatedly that any change in the rotation system must be decided and agreed upon by all component parties. Based on the stance of Umno and PBS, the possibility of the rotation system being scrapped is now real. But before that, PBS has to gain re-admission into BN, a move that has ruffled feathers among some components party leaders.

Though most component parties in the Sabah BN have publicly supported the PBS move to rejoin BN, it is evident that a number of them are privately uneasy as it will mean each of them having less seats in the next state elections.

PBS vice president Dr Yee Moh Chai is aware that the party's proposition to rejoin BN is stirring some 'uneasiness'. 'It is a matter that we will look into if our application to re-join the BN is settled,' he tells Malaysian Business. 'We are taking one step at a time.'

The Sabah BN now is made up of mainly Umno, two Kadazandusun-based parties and two parties representing the Chinese community. Behind the scenes, top party officials are looking at mergers within the component parties to take place next year.

The aide to Chong does not discount the possibility of the two Chinese-based parties - LDP and Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) - merging. The Kadazan-based parties in BN are Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS) led by Tan Sri Joseph Kurup, and Tan Sri Bernard Dompok's United Pasok Momogun Kadazandusun (Upko).

Both PBRS and Upko are actually made up of former supporters of PBS. Hence, a merger between all three cannot be ruled out although PBS portrays itself as a multiracial party.

A merger among the Kadazandusun parties is vital as it will end up having the second biggest voice in the state assembly after Umno, a strength that could prove useful during the redelineation exercise to be held next year. At present, of the 48 seats, there are 24 Muslim Bumiputera majority seats and 15 Kadazandusun seats while the rest are mixed areas or have a large population of Chinese voters.

Speculation is rife that one of the push factors for PBS to re-join BN is for the Kadazandusun community to have some say in the redelineation exercise next year. What PBS fears most, say critics, is a further erosion in the number of Kadazandusun majority seats.

'If they are not within the BN, the number of Kadazandusun majority seats will be less,' says an Umno leader.

Yee dispels such a notion. 'The decision to rejoin BN was purely in the interest of the people ... we have emphasised on that fact,' he stresses. 'If PBS is admitted to BN, the role of PBS is still to work in the interest of people no matter what the other considerations are.'

After 11 years, the notion of PBS rejoining the BN coalition is not a distant dream. Pairin is already 61 and he knows that for Kadazandusuns to continue to be a force to be reckoned with, PBS has to fight from within the coalition.

Tun Mohamed Fuad Stephens, a former Kadazandusun leader, dissolved Upko in 1967 and joined Umno then, to be in the mainstream leadership. Fuad subsequently went on to lead Berjaya which ruled Sabah for nine years until 1985.

PBS ruled Sabah for nine years until 1994. A multi-party coalition of BN has been heading Sabah for the past seven years. Whether another change happens in two years time or not is left to be seen.

But when PBS is re-admitted into the BN coalition, the landscape in the wild, wild political world of the Land Below The Wind will change. The rotation system may come under increasing pressure to be scrapped and smaller parties may be forced to merge.

The developments in Sabah points to a new formula in the bag for continued rule BN.

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