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Unity (News Focus)

SINCERITY WILL DETERMINE IF MALAY UNITY TALKS MATERIALISES

By: Ahmad Fuad Yahya and Harlina Samson

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 21 (Bernama) -- The postponement of the Malay unity talks between Umno and PAS has not only disappointed many, especially the Malays themselves, but also raised questions about PAS's sincerity.

Several Umno leaders alleged PAS was insincere in wanting to hold the talks, supposed to have been held on Feb 19, while PAS pointed its finger at Umno.

The media, in their eagerness to report on the latest development concerning the talks, turned it into a polemic.

The success or failure of the talks now depends on the sincerity of both parties concerned and the constructive support of the media.

PAS announced on Feb 18 that it was postponing the meeting after having set three pre-conditions -- that the Federal government pay oil royalties to Terengganu, that the PAS newspaper Harakah be allowed to be published twice weekly, and that the government turn down Umno's proposal for political parties to drop the word Islam from their names.

A political analyst said the postponement was a "political play" by PAS.

"The pre-conditions set by PAS could have been raised during the talks," he said.

"Umno has stated its open stance and has in fact, agreed to discuss the four items on the agenda proposed. Why then set pre-conditions?"

An Umno leader, when contacted, said if PAS set pre-conditions, Umno too could do the same.

"But, will that solve anything? Instead, we should be brave enough to meet first and discuss," he said.

Umno, on its part, has shown it is sincere in wanting to hold the talks by not setting any pre-conditions despite its political differences with PAS.

When the Umno and PAS technical committees for the proposed Malay unity talks first met officially on Feb 8, the first official meeting between the two parties in 20 years, it raised hopes in efforts to promote Malay unity.

Umno secretary general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob and his PAS counterpart Nasharuddin Mat Isa were all smiles after that first meeting.

Umno appeared very "accommodative" by its readiness to expand the topics to be discussed to include national unity as pursued by PAS.

However, PAS took offence at Umno's announcing of the date set for the talks, which was proposed by PAS. It claimed Umno had breached an agreement to keep details of the technical committee meeting secret.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is also the Umno president, had on Feb 10 after the Umno Supreme Council meeting, in good faith announced the proposed Feb 19 date for the talks.

Datuk Dusuki Ahmad, a member of the Umno technical committee, when asked to comment on the postponement, said Umno felt the proposed date was not a "secret detail" of the meeting.

"The date proposed by Umno was Feb 21 and PAS Feb 19. So Umno accepted the date proposed by PAS," he said.

In retaliation for Umno's announcing of the proposed date, Nasharuddin called a press conference on Feb 15 and made public four issues that PAS wanted discussed in the talks -- the judicial system, democracy, economy and Islam.

The three pre-conditions stated later by PAS have raised eye-brows

since they were not distinctly mentioned during the first technical committee meeting.

Dusuki said the three issues were not stated as pre-conditions but merely raised by a PAS representative during the meeting.

The three issues were made pre-conditions by PAS at the second technical committee meeting.

Nasharuddin, when met, said both sides had agreed to keep details of their first technical committee meeting secret.

"The problem was caused by Umno, not PAS," he said.

He said the three pre-conditions set to establish a "conducive" environment for the talks was a PAS right since it was the "invited" party.

"The situation must be conducive for the meeting to be held, but, such a situation does not exist now," said Nasharuddin.

He did not say how long the postponement will be but said it would allow the technical committees of both sides to meet once again.

On whether PAS could just raise the pre-conditions in the talks itself, Nasharuddin said: "The mandate given (to the technical committee) must be fulfilled to establish a conducive environment ... otherwise, it will be difficult to meet".

Both sides have stated their continued interest in holding the talks and for their technical committees to continue discussions.

Dr Mahathir was reported as saying on Sunday, after the PAS decision to postpone the talks, that Umno still wanted to hold the Malay unity talks and if there were pre-conditions "we want to see what we can do".

PAS president Datuk Fadzil Noor today said his party was committed in efforts to hold the Malay unity talks and that the three pre-conditions set must be met to establish a conducive environment.

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