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Sabah-Rotation (News Analysis)

SURPRISING NONTHELESS BUT A PROMISE IS A PROMISE

KOTA KINABALU, March 17 (Bernama) -- Surprised? Such is probably the reaction of many people to the Prime Minister's decision, announced yesterday, on the system of rotation for the post of Sabah chief minister.

Until today, some are still having problem accepting reality that Datuk Chong Kah Kiat is the new Sabah chief minister, succeeding Datuk Osu Sukam.

They had hoped to see the rotation system scrapped but remained committed to their pledge earlier to abide with whatever decision made by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"However, we seek cooperation from other Barisan Nasional (BN) component parties as this is a major sacrifice by Umno for the sake of unity and political stability in the state," said Sabah Umno Youth chief Tawfiq Abu Bakar Titingan.

The Sabah Umno Youth was among those which had sent a memorandum to the Prime Minister, seeking the abolition of the rotation system.

Clearly, according to one source, the decision to continue with the rotation system was a surprise, considering that as at yesterday morning all indications seemed to point to its demise.

This was further reinforced by Dr Mahathir's statement several weeks earlier that the rotation system had created "lame duck" chief ministers.

As such, according to some observers, the logical conclusion would be not to continue with the system.

"The biggest surprise was naturally the decision to retain the system as right up to the final moments, the information we got was that the system would be abolished and that Osu would continue to be the chief minister," said the source.

But to some political observers, it was no surprise judging from the consistent stand of Dr Mahathir in keeping to his promise to rotate the post of Sabah chief minister.

The call to abolish the system was not the first and Dr Mahathir remained steadfast in his promise to the people to give the leaders of the three major communities in Sabah -- Muslim bumiputera, Chinese and non-Muslim bumiputera -- to head the state government for a term of two years each.

A former Sabah chief minister Tan Sri Peter Lo said the announcement brought to two good news, one being that the Prime Minister kept his promise.

"The promise to rotate the post in terms of the Barisan Nasional election manifesto has been honoured and also in the selection of candidate. The net, as it were, has been cast wider and not merely confined to the bigger parties so that everyone gets a chance to serve," he said.

However, slight changes have been made to the rotation system in particular to acknowledge Umno's position as the biggest BN component party in Sabah while at the same time continuing to give opportunity to other communities their share of governing the state.

Under the new arrangement, Umno will get two terms as against one term by other component parties in each rotation.

One source said Sabah Umno was not wholly in favour of wanting Osu to stay on as chief minister.

"Osu is seen as a person who wants to do everything by the book, especially in matters relating to appointment of individuals to certain posts," said the source.

The decision was also a surprise to the Kadazandusuns who had looked forward to seeing one of their leaders appointed to the post if the rotation system was continued.

The question was, why was their leader not appointed to the post?

When the question was posed to United Pasok Momogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO) president Tan Sri Bernard Dompok said there was nothing to be worried about as the decision to continue with the rotation system had acknowledged the role played by the community.

"What the Prime Minister has done is fair to the Kadazandusuns for the type of support the community gave to the BN," he said.

"I felt very sad about the election results in 1999. I was the chief minister then...even when the prime minister had promised to allow me to continue to hold the post should I win, I lost in the election and not only that, our party was almost wiped out," he said.

If the decision was a disappointment to some, the appointment of Chong, the president of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), might provide some sorts of relief to them since he is a leader, liked by many. Actually, Chong was one of those tipped to head the state government if Dr Mahathir decided to continue with the rotation system.

Now that the question over the rotation system has been answered, the people will want to know next when will Chong head the state government. What will be the composition of his state cabinet? And what fate will await Osu?

All these provides plenty of things to think about during the weekend.

--BERNAMA

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