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Two questions uppermost about the next Sabah Chief Minister

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TWO questions have surfaced as Datuk Seri Osu Sukam's two-year term as Sabah Chief Minister draws nearer to a close under a system of rotating the post among the three main communities in the State.

Many are eager to know if the rotation will continue and who will be the next Chief Minister when Osu's term expires in March.

Some have openly said that the rotation should be continued, but there are also those who feel that the time has come for the system to be reviewed to evaluate whether it should be retained or discontinued.

When Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad made a brief stop-over in Kota Kinabalu en route to Kuala Lumpur after visiting Osaka, Japan, last week, some expected him to shed light on the matter.

But all Dr Mahathir, who is the Barisan Nasional chairman, had to say was: "I have not made up my mind."

The Prime Minister was also not ready to reveal if a non-Muslim Bumiputera would be appointed as Osu's replacement.

"If we say everything now ... there is nothing to say later," said Dr Mahathir.

His answers gave rise to questions about the future of the system and to various interpretations of what he meant.

"People are free to interpret the Prime Minister's statement, but I think he (Dr Mahathir) has already made up his mind," said Sabah Umno deputy chairman Datuk Seri Salleh Tun Said.

Introduced when the Barisan Nasional took over the State administration in April 1994, the system enabled a Muslim Bumiputera, a non-Muslim Bumiputera and a Chinese to take turns every two years at being Chief Minister.

It was introduced to demonstrate the BN's sincerity in sharing power among the three main communities in Sabah.

The first to be appointed Chief Minister under the system was Tun Sakaran Dandai who had to relinquish the post after seven months to pave the way for his appointment as Sabah's Yang di-Pertua Negeri.

Since the introduction of the rotation system, Sabah has seen five different Chief Ministers (including Osu) in seven years which, perhaps, is a record unmatched by any other State in Malaysia.

As the Prime Minister did not give a conclusive answer to the issue, many thought that Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi would when he made a three-day visit to Sabah which ended last Saturday.

But at a Press conference called just before he left, Abdullah told a reporter that he had nothing to say on the matter.

A State Umno leader who insisted on anonymity said the rotation issue was raised when Abdullah had a closed-door meeting with State Umno leaders during his visit to Sabah, but he (Abdullah) declined to go into the subject.

Osu, who prefers to concentrate on his duty as Chief Minister rather than talk about the rotation, feels that the matter is best left to the wisdom of the Prime Minister.

"BN component parties in Sabah have decided to leave the matter to the Prime Minister to decide and as such, we should concentrate on developing the State rather than divert our attention to the rotation issue," he said.

Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah president Tan Sri Joseph Kurup agrees with

Osu, saying that what is important is for all the BN component parties to co-operate and focus attention on uplifting the living standard of the people.

"If the rotation continues, whoever is chosen as Chief Minister we should accept as was the practice before," said Kurup, who is among those tipped to be Osu's likely successor if the rotation is continued.

While the debate on the rotation continues, several names were being bandied about as the likely person to take over from Osu.

Going by a statement made by Abdullah when he announced Osu's appointment as Chief Minister after the BN's victory in the 1999 State election, a non-Muslim Bumiputera would be next to be appointed to the post.

However, lately there has been talk that the possibility of a Chinese leader replacing Osu cannot be ruled out.

The reason being, it would resolve the keen tussle between United Pasok Momogun Kadazandusun Organisation (Upko) and Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRs) for the post.

Upko had openly said that a leader from the party should be appointed as the next Chief Minister as its president, Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, did not complete his two-year term when he lost the Moyog seat in the 1999 State election.

Not to be outdone, the PBRs, whose strength had been boosted by the entry of six Opposition Parti Bersatu Sabah Assemblymen into the party, has also been lobbying for the post.

"While both Upko and PBRs have made public statements that they would support whoever is appointed as the next Chief Minister, it is no secret that they are fighting for the post," said a political observer.

Instead of fighting for the post, the two Kadazandusun-based parties should see to it that a leader from the community is appointed to the post not just to serve out the 14 months which Dompok did not complete but for the full two years, added the observer.

Other names being mentioned for the post are Liberal Democratic Party president Datuk Chong Kah Kiat, Upko deputy president Datuk Wilfred Bumburing and PBRs deputy president Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan.

The possibility of Dompok, who is Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, being appointed as a nominated Assemblyman to pave the way for his appointment as the next Chief Minister cannot be discounted.

But the question of who will be Chief Minister next is only relevant after a decision has been made whether or not to continue the rotation.

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