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Waiting for Taib's next move

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THERE have been reports that Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, who has held the reins in Sarawak for 20 years, may leave his Asajaya seat, which he won uncontested in the last election, to contest elsewhere.

His detractors may say this move is due to the announcement by Taib's former Party Pesaka Bersatu (PBB) deputy, Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha, that he will challenge the Chief Minister in Asajaya, but Taib's supporters paint a different picture.

"Taib can beat Abang Abu Bakar hands down in Asajaya anytime although his opponent can put up a good fight," said a former aide to the Chief Minister. "It is therefore not a question of running away."

He pointed out that Abang Abu Bakar could still challenge Taib wherever the Chief Minister chose to stand.

The aide said attacks on Taib, whether in coffeeshops or on the Internet, had made few dents in his armour.

The Chief Minister has denied that the Government favoured his two sons who are businessmen.

"Taib has faced more daunting challenges before and emerged stronger and wiser. This is all part of politics," he said.

He cited the turbulent years from 1985-88 when Taib fell out with his uncle, Tun Abdul Rahman Yaakob, whom he succeeded as Sarawak's fourth Chief Minister in 1981, and the various plots to topple him.

The PBB at present has 29 out of 62 seats, followed by the Sarawak United Peoples' Party (SUPP) with 13, Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS) with 8 and Sarawak National Action Party (SNAP) with seven.

The opposition DAP won two seats, Bukit Asek, and Pelawan, while Telang Usan and Meradong were captured by independents. The DAP is only considered to be strong in Sibu.

However on Feb 9, DAP assemblyman for Pelawan, Wong Sing Nang resigned from the party citing its continued association with Pas under the Opposition front umbrella as his reason.

As for reports that Taib may choose a new seat, it is believed that festering rivalry between the Malays and Melanau (Taib is a Melanau) may be the reason.

The talk is that Taib has already contributed tremendously to Asajaya, within the Kota Samarahan parliamentary constituency of which he is also the Member of Parliament. In comparison, several Melanau-dominated areas have lagged behind.

Melanau leaders feel that as Taib has almost reached the end of his political career, this is the only opportunity for the largely undeveloped but resource-rich central region to benefit by having the Chief Minister as its representative.

In early February, PBB Youth leader for Balingian, Sulaiman Sahari, reiterated his call for Taib to stand in Balingian, a move unanimously backed by 26 PBB branches in Balingian and supported by all Barisan Nasional components.

In addition, four other Melanau majority seats namely Belawai, Serdeng, Matu Daro and Dalat have been offered to Taib.

Dalat incumbent Datuk Mohd Effendi Norwawi, the Federal Agriculture Minister, said all four assemblymen were prepared to give up their seats for Taib, who would be in a better position to bring development to the central region.

Effendi has since confirmed that he will not be defending his Dalat seat.

Has Taib been an effective leader for Sarawak? The former aide said the State's dynamic progress over the last two decades is due largely to Taib's leadership.

Taib himself has often warned the Malays against wasting their votes on the Opposition as only 23 of 62 seats are Malay.

"Make no mistake about it. Taib is a tough and shrewd leader. Otherwise, how could he have survived all these years?" said the former aide. Taib was fully aware of what was happening on the ground.

"Taib does not like to sling mud in public. He walks softly but carries a big stick."

At 64, the charismatic Taib, who is an ardent fan of the late Tan Sri P. Ramlee, is in reasonably good health. The next echelon PBB leaders include State Agriculture and Food Industries Minister Datuk Adenan Satem, who won the Muara Tuang state seat uncontested in 1996, and Effendi.

As for Datuk Abang Abu Bakar, 59, who like Taib is a former Defence Minister, it is widely believed he will stand as an independent.

The writing was on the wall when he lost to Datuk Abang Johari Tun Openg in a three-cornered tussle at the party's general assembly in 1998.

He lost his Cabinet post when he was not nominated for the 1999 election. His Kuala Rajang seat was instead given to Effendi.

"Abang Abu", as he is locally known, then hoisted Umno colours but the national Umno leadership has withheld its blessings.

Both Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi have made it clear that Umno will not come to Sarawak as long as the existing Barisan Nasional government remains strong and is accepted by the people.

He is understandably keeping his distance from other parties such as Keadilan.

Keadilan is also fighting shy of him, saying that while he is opposing Taib in Sarawak, he is pro-BN at the Federal level.

A PBB supporter and campaign worker described Sarawak Keadilan as "Permas members wearing Keadilan clothes". (Permas or Persatuan Rakyat Malaysia Sarawak was formed in 1987 to topple Taib).

Almost all the parties claim they are ready for the polls. However STAR president Dr Patau Rubis, a one-time BN maverick, said his party had yet to make preparations.

SUPP, the second biggest BN component after PBB, is optimistic about winning all 17 seats allocated to it in the coming election.

Its president, Tan Sri Dr George Chan said the party would be fielding several new faces especially in Padungan, Bukit Asek, Pelawan and Meradong.

SNAP has finalised its list for the seven seats it holds. Party president and veteran politician Datuk Amar James Wong Kim Min, 78, will give up his Limbang seat to his son Richard Wong Shoon Fook, a senior vice-president of the party.

Datuk Amar James, who is State Environment and Public Health Minister, is the longest serving cabinet minister and was the Deputy Chief Minister in the 1960s.

The remaining six incumbents - William Mawan Ikom (Pakan), Peter Nyarok Entrie (Krian), Geman Itam (Meluan), Peter Nansian Nguise (Tasik Biru), Sylvester Entri Muran (Marudi) and Dr Judson Sakai Tagal (Be'kelalan) - will be defending their seats.

As for PBDS, its relations with Taib have not been smooth and many in Taib's camp still question its loyalty. PBDS and SNAP have also been at loggerheads for a long time and have never reconciled.

Ibans and Dayaks make up 50 per cent of voters in Sarawak. Many feel that being the majority, the leadership should rightly be theirs, and not the privilege of the Malays and Melanaus who only make up 25 per cent.

But this time around, there is in-fighting within PBDS ranks and talk that independent candidates will be fielded in the eight constituencies it now holds.

PBDS, led by Energy, Communications and Multimedia Minister, Datuk Amar Leo Moggie, is split into two camps headed respectively by vice-president Datuk Dr James Masing and deputy president Datuk Daniel Tajem.

Masing, who was State Tourism Minister, challenged Tajem for the deputy president's post at the delegates' conference last August but was decisively beaten.

There were more problems when Moggie appointed Masing as information chief. Party members fear PBDS influence may be eroded if in-fighting is not stopped in time.

While politicians and their supporters await the election with bated breath, the rakyat go about their daily work and do not seem bothered at all.

Taxi driver Ah Lek, 45, from Batu Kawa said most people just want to be able to go about their business and cari makan (earn a livelihood).

He said he was more concerned at the rising cost of living. These days, he said, one could spend RM100 and get a mere two plastic bags of household necessities.

"You can see a lot of changes in Sarawak today. Opposition parties will not stand a chance and newer ones will stand even less of a chance," he said.

Ah Lek said he now works every day including Sunday to make sure he earns enough to support his family and also to pay the monthly instalment on his car.

Businessman Abdul Karim Bujang, 59, of Kuching, said the present government has contributed tremendously to Sarawak's progress.

"But there is some dissatisfaction among Malays, coffeeshop talk about nepotism and cronyism," he said.

Contractors and businessmen, he said, were unhappy about the red tape they have to face as well as alleged favouritism in the award of tenders and contracts.

Frankie Bendindang Manjah, 44, chairman of the Kapit District Council, said the Iban, Orang Ulu, Chinese and Malays were able to live in harmony in this remote timber-based area due to the Government's just policies.

"Kapit has the potential for eco-tourism, with Pelagus being well known for its many rapids. But we are far behind in infrastructure. A road linking Song to Kapit is very much needed," he said.

The Opposition, he said, would not stand a chance here and candidates would only lose their deposits.

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