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Who after Moggie?

S C Chan

POLITICS can sometimes create strange bed-fellows. Take the case of Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS), one of the four components of Sarawak's ruling Barisan Nasional.

Less than two years ago, two factions, one led by then incumbent deputy president Datuk Daniel Tajem, the other by then senior vice-president Datuk Seri Dr James Masing, were engaged in a bitter fight for posts from deputy president downwards. However, Masing and his men lost badly despite support from president Datuk Amar Leo Moggie, who was returned unopposed for another three-year term.

Today, these two factions appear to be closing ranks. Ironically, the main reason touted is Moggie's recent and sudden announcement that he will be stepping down as president at the party's triennial delegates conference next year.

The problem for Moggie, who is the Federal Energy, Communications and Multimedia Minister, is that several of the party's supreme council members have publicly stated he should exit the scene sooner. He probably hadn't expected such a reaction.

Party sources say the message at the supreme council meeting on Feb 16 was quite clear. In fact, the majority were even prepared to let him apply for party leave and allow Tajem to act as president until next year's party elections.

Masing, who is PBDS information chief, and youth leader Joseph Entulu have urged party members to respect their president's decision to relinquish his post at the delegates meeting, expected in August 2003 or latest by January 2004.

Masing, the State Minister for Social Development and Urbanisation, was quoted by the English-language Sarawak Tribune as saying: 'I think he (Moggie) has made his final decision. I think we have to respect his wish to retire. I can tell you that he is very serious about wanting to retire this time.'

So who will succeed Moggie? Miri division chairman Richard Will tells Malaysian Business he thinks Moggie prefers Member of Parliament for Julau, Joseph Salang Gandum, a former bank manager and now a successful Iban businessman and director of Telekom Malaysia.

Sources say Moggie first intimated his intention to relinquish the top party post to vice-president Datuk Sng Chee Hua about two months ago. At about the same time, Masing and Entulu met Moggie separately in Kuala Lumpur over the succession issue and came up with a proposed line-up of the next supreme council. Both Tajem and Salang were not on the list, say the sources.

Apparently, Moggie had wanted to keep his retirement plans to a select few party colleagues but word soon got out. He also did not expect Malaysian Today to carry that 'private chit chat' as a headline story a few days later. Moggie was left with little choice but to confirm the report.

He later explained to the media that he had decided to make the announcement to give members ample time to think about his successor. Interestingly, in that respect he did not once mention his deputy president Tajem's name, although Tajem would automatically be acting president should Moggie step down before his term. And, according to the sources, this could very well happen if Moggie finds the pressure too

much.

Talk is that the Tajem and Masing factions have now struck a harmonious chord. At least, the two erstwhile opponents for the party's second highest post have been in touch over the successor issue. Sng, who was seen pulling the strings for Tajem in the last party elections, is now seen as closely aligned to Masing.

This is quite understandable - Masing had a lot to do with Sng getting his 22-year-old son Larry nominated as a PBDS candidate and elected in the last September State elections. Sng is said to harbour high political ambitions for his son.

Although Sng has said he is withdrawing to give way to younger leaders, most observers feel he has not given up the idea of contesting in the next State elections. The party has six MPs and seven State Assemblymen.

Where does Tajem stand in all this? Some have already described him as a has-been or on the way out. He tells Malaysian Business he wants to have a heart-to-heart talk with Moggie to find out his 'real reasons' for wanting to step down.

'If the party has achieved what it set out to do and my services are no longer needed, I am more than happy to withdraw,' says Tajem, a former Sarawak Deputy Chief Minister and former envoy to New Zealand. (Tajem led the breakaway faction from the Sarawak National Party in 1983 to form PBDS, and he asked Moggie to lead the party.)

While there are clearly indications that the Tajem and Masing factions are closing ranks, Moggie loyalists, including Salang, think it is too early to comment on the party president's decision to step down.

Salang tells Malaysian Business, 'Let things cool down first. After all, party elections are still a long way off.'

So, should Moggie have to relinquish his presidency well ahead of party polls because of parliamentary elections, which may be held earlier, then Tajem will have to assume the mantle.

It is understood there is already a move to put such a plan in place before the Gawai Dayak celebrations in June this year. This has led to the belief that Moggie may have in fact been planning to step down much earlier, and that he may have already informed Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad of his intention. Moggie has been in politics for more than three decades. Family members are also said to be pressuring him to quit politics.

'But timing is very crucial,' says lawyer and supreme council member Kilat Beriak. 'The party and the Dayak community have to be fully prepared for any transition of leadership. Now is not the time.'

Even Tajem has acknowledged that it will be difficult to find someone who can fit Moggie's shoes. 'He is a good leader of this country and certainly a good representative of Sarawak in the Federal Cabinet. He is often consulted by the Federal Government on matters of great importance to Sarawak.'

That's not all. Certain quarters within the Iban community see Moggie not only as their de facto leader but also a highly respected senior Federal Minister. 'He is an important link between Sarawak and the Federal Government,' they say. 'We must be aware of the implications if that link is severed.'

But such noble sentiments may be washed away by the political currents now sweeping PBDS. Already, this is reflected in the apparent factional re-alignment and consolidation of forces within the party.

It is likely that all these will be further expedited by Moggie's announcement and the expectation of early parliamentary elections, followed by party polls.

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