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Pairin: I secretly admired Mahathir

KOTA KINABALU: A one-time political foe of the Prime Minister admitted yesterday he was a secret admirer of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Parti Bersatu Sabah president Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan told the 18th party congress declared opened by Dr Mahathir that they had been "sparing partners" in the past.

"In those times (when PBS was in the opposition) I must admit I was a secret admirer of his (Dr Mahathir)," said Pairin who pulled PBS out of the Barisan Nasional fold on the eve of the 1990 elections and joined opposition front of Parti Melayu Semangat 46, PAS and DAP before returning to Barisan in January last year.

What was then described as "a stab in the back" that saw the entry of Umno into Sabah, was forgotten at the Hongkod Kojasaan yesterday where PBS delegates gave Dr Mahathir a rousing welcome, waving the Jalur Gemilang.

Pairin and the PBS delegates also honoured Dr Mahathir by bestowing him the title *Bapa Perpaduan Nasional* (Father of National Unity).

Pairin punctuated his welcoming speech with *pantun* thanking Dr Mahathir for his leadership.

When Dr Mahathir took to the rostrum, he said by tradition he had to respond to the *pantun* but this time, he said: "I surrender," as he set a lighter mood among the delegates who later gave him a standing ovation at the end of his speech.