

02 MAR 2003

Sabah-Rotation

SABAH IN FOR LEADERSHIP CHANGE AGAIN

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, March 2 (Bernama) -- Sabah will have a new chief minister later this month as Datuk Chong Kah Kiat makes his exit after completing his turn to run the state for two years.

Chong will soon join a growing list of former chief ministers in a state which for the last nine years practises a rotation system for the chief executive's post that is the only one of its kind in the world.

He will be the sixth on the list, a sharp contrast to the situation before the rotation system was introduced in 1994 when there were only four chief ministers for 27 years.

Except for a brief period of less than year in 1975-76 when Tan Sri (later Tun) Said Keruak was chief minister, the other three, Tun Datu Mustapha Datu Harun, Datuk Harris Salleh and Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan, were at the helm for virtually nine years each.

When Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad came up with the idea of rotating the post among leaders of the state Barisan Nasional component parties in the 1994 state election, it was to devolve or "dilute" powers that a chief minister of the then politically volatile state seemed to amass in his hands.

The powers and influence that Mustapha, Harris and Pairin wielded over the state during their time were legendary and have become part and parcel of Malaysia's political history.

Sabah from its independence within the Malaysian federation in 1963 through to the 1970s and up to the early 1990s, was better known for its politics of patronage where political masters became very powerful in their own right.

Politics of patronage centred on timber, the state's main natural resource, giving rise to a phenomenon where the who's who of Sabah during this period was made up virtually of a politician or timber tycoon, or both.

It thus came as a cultural shock to this state nicknamed "Land Below the Wind" when the rotation system virtually took the winds out of the chief minister's sails.

But six chief ministers and nine years later, has the rotation system achieved its objective of equitable power-sharing and brought political stability to a state whose political stakes used to zig-zag like its ubiquitous logging tracks?

"If the meaning of equitable power-sharing concept is confined to access to the chief minister's post, then I would say that the objective has been more than achieved," said Dr Yaakub Johari, executive director of Institute of Development Studies (IDS), the state government think-tank.

He said even the leaders of BN parties which on their own would not be able to form a government were accorded the opportunity to be chief minister.

"In this sense, the smaller parties representing small groups of people were accorded greater privilege, even at the expense of the majority. The system could be seen as according greater equity to smaller groups in a disproportionate manner," Dr Yaakub told Bernama.

Umno, the backbone of the state BN has 26 seats in the State Legislative Assembly, double that of Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) while the United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO) and Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) have three each, the Liberal Democratic Party

headed by Chong has two seats and there is one independent.

But Datuk Dr Maximus Ongkili, deputy president of the PBS which rejoined the BN a year ago after being out of it for 12 years, said that rotating the chief minister's post did not add much to real power-sharing, unless the concept of power-sharing is defined simply as sharing the top post, "which is too unrealistic a measure".

But both agreed that the system has brought about political stability in Sabah, which has seen the unseating of government by newly-formed parties. The classic case was in 1976 when PBS formed just two months earlier, toppled the Berjaya government of nine years led by Harris.

" There is no doubt that the rotation system has brought about political stability. There has obviously been differing views among the component parties, but the system has ensured that there are no contentious views, especially those which tend to be too particularistic or parochialistic which have dominated or permeated the process of governance," Dr Yaakub said.

In his view, the system seemed to reinforce a consensual decision-making process and enhanced political stability. Prior to this, political instability was induced when certain groups felt marginalised from the mainstream.

Dr Maximus, who is both a Member of Parliament and State Assemblyman, told Bernama: " Political stability is gauged in terms of political strength and dominance of the government in the State Assembly and Parliament. A strong and united government leads to stability of administration".

Dr Yaakub said while chief ministers previously had tremendous powers in running the state, under the system, there was less likelihood for power to be monopolised or concentrated.

And according to Dr Yaakub, timber is no longer a powerful trump-card for the powers that be in the state, a far cry from the days of Mustapha, Harris and Pairin.

As he put it: " Timber is no longer a powerful factor as it used to be. Firstly, the state's timber resource is depleting. Secondly, the quality of timber substitutes from rubber trees and other tree crops has been improving, in certain cases surpassing even the quality of natural timber, thanks to aggressive research.

" Thirdly, there has been increasing recognition on the need to conserve, such as for recreation, preservation of genetic resources as a carbon sink, apart from many others".

But there is no doubt in the minds of both Dr Yaakub and Dr Maximus about the downside of the two-year rotation system, saying it had caused frequent disruptions in the administrative processes and lack of continuity in long-term planning.

A new chief minister normally takes along a new set of officers and political aides as well as working styles and it certainly takes a while for government functionaries to get used to the new appointees and working styles, argued Dr Yaakub.

"By the time the incumbent chief minister completes his tenure, an aura of uncertainty tends to prevail in the government machinery. In certain cases, important decisions might have to be put on hold, pending the resolution of the uncertainty," he said.

He said long-term planning required a dedicated team of policy-makers and officers under the leadership of the chief minister, adding that frequent changes in the chief minister would clearly affect the way priorities were determined.

Dr Yaakub said frequent adjustment in government priorities could disorientate the participation of the private sector, especially in areas

where the government was expected to set the direction.

"There is much lobbying and manoeuvring among interested factions at the conclusion of each two-year term that there is enormous time wasting and much uncertainty for investors," said Dr Maximus.

This, said Dr Maximus, was also disruptive to the civil service, leading to overspending as each chief executive tried to "outdo each other in terms of trying to do something useful", normally development projects which usually were unbudgeted for.

Both agreed that a five-year term would be the most ideal.

"The national development plan, for example, is spread over five years. The two-year term is certainly too short for a party leader to implement a meaningful economic development plan," said Dr Yaakub.

Chong, the incumbent chief minister, disclosed recently that Sabah was now saddled with a debt of more than RM1 billion "simply because it has spent the amount it does not have".

National Economic Action Council executive director Datuk Mustapa Mohamed told a seminar in Kota Kinabalu earlier this week that financially, Sabah, once a wealthy state, "has reached the point of no return".

Chong said: "I have managed to put the fear of God in the hearts of those with bad intentions and dishonest agenda," referring to rampant wastage by government agencies which performed like "black holes" -- whatever money the government puts in, it disappears without any returns.

But he said the government's war on wastage had been successful through prudent management and securing significant relief from the burden of massive public debt.

Both Dr Yaakub and Dr Maximus were also asked about the possibility of the next chief minister, who will be picked from Umno, being appointed from among those who had previously held the post.

Dr Yaakub said he believed there had been some "informal discussions" about it, while Dr Maximus said having too many ex-chief ministers was costly to the taxpayers.

This was due to higher financial outlays in terms of pensions and perks, as well as administrative costs of change.

"It could be considered inconsistent with the idea of sharing power and giving others a chance, yet at the same time it's a pity that a guy who does a good job is given only two years to serve in that capacity," said Dr Maximus.

"I think the idea is a good one and definitely worth considering," said Dr Yaakub.

-- BERNAMA

AU AU AAM