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Sabah-Rotation

TO ROTATE OR NOT TO ROTATE, THAT IS THE QUESTION

By: Jackson Sawatan

KOTA KINABALU, Jan 21 (Bernama) -- If Shakespeare had been a Sabahan, writing a play about the intricacy of Sabah politics, then Hamlet -- the protagonist in the play by the same name -- might have ended up uttering his famous line this way, "to rotate, or not to rotate, that is the question".

Hamlet's original line in one of the play's opening scenes, was of course written like this, "to be, or not to be, that is the question".

There was much more to Hamlet's oration as the plot thickens and scenes unfolds, punctuated by a potent portrayal of dilemmas.

But enough of Hamlet, let us go into Sabah politics; will the Barisan Nasional (BN) leadership decide to continue or discontinue the rotation system, that is the question.

At the moment there appears to be no definite answer, although Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi did shed some light on the issue by indicating that the system would remain until all parties can come up with a better system of power-sharing.

"If we want to change the system, we have to come up with a suggestion for a new one and get the views from all those involved. We have to discuss it at length before making the change...the new system, too, has to be better than the present one," Abdullah was quoted as saying.

The unique system was mooted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at a meet-the-people session in Beaufort, 100km from here, in the heat of campaigning for the 1994 Sabah state election.

It was to give the opportunity to leaders from the three major communities

-- Muslim Bumiputeras, Chinese and non-Muslim Bumiputeras -- to take turns to lead the state government on a two-year term each.

The system however underwent some modification two years ago when the present Chief Minister Datuk Chong Kah Kiat was appointed to the post.

Under the new format, leaders from Umno would get two terms in each rotation as against only one for the Chinese and non-Muslim Bumiputeras.

Under the present system Chong, representing the Chinese, would hand over the leadership baton to a leader from Umno in March this year after completing his two-year term.

At least that is how it seems at the moment, barring unforeseen circumstances.

Despite the clear-cut system -- whereby the post had to be rotated after each term expires -- there were, however, doubts raised each time as to whether the system would survive.

Opinion varies, with Umno and Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), by virtue of their past stands, appearing to be on the same side in favour of the abolition of the nine-year-old system, which had so far seen the appointment of six Chief Ministers.

Some leaders were of the opinion that the system needed to be reviewed further or fine-tuned to suit the current political scenario.

Other component parties were adamant that the system be continued, thus creating a dilemma of sorts in the state that is still trying to get a good grip at what is known as political stability.

This "Shakespearean dilemma" occurred not because there was no decision made in the past.

In fact decisions had been handed down time and again -- that the

system be continued, and that was it.

"The very reason that the new format was introduced by itself showed that a decision had actually been made on the issue," noted an observer.

But what made the rotation issue peculiar was that a decision, no matter how accomodating it was, was not regarded as final until it ended up with the ultimate scrapping of the system.

Sabah politics had been known for its ability to spring a surprise or two, and that might just be the case on this issue -- the possibility of the rotation not materialising in March was not that remote.

Already there is talk that the term of the present Chief Minister which expires in March this year, will be extended to enable him to continue leading the state until the next Sabah state election, which can be called anytime from now and April next year.

In fact, such talk had been making the rounds as early as middle of last year.

Some political observers however were of the opinion that the extension of Chong's term would depend very much on how soon the next state election would be called.

"If it is sooner, then the possiblity of extension is there," noted an observer.

Chong himself is preparing for the transition of power.

"I am aware that there are many who wish I could continue to lead the state. I thank them for their confidence and trust in me," said Chong.

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) President however said: "When I first assumed this post, I made a commitment that I shall not stay one minute longer once my term expires. Come March 27 I shall relinquish my post and step aside to make way for my successor."

Come March, the answer to most of the questions would be known.

In the meantime, the rotation system would remain a talking point.

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