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Battle-weary Huguan Siou is happy to return `home'

Kalimullah Hassan

DATUK Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan, prodigal son of the Barisan Nasional, tells KALIMULLAH HASSAN of his rupture and his emotional reunion with the Federal Government.

TAMBUNAN is a picturesque, scenic little town nestled in the mountains of the Crocker Range in Sabah. The crystal clear waters of the Pegalan River which gush through the town, the reeds and swaying bamboo, the constantly crisp and fresh air, and the poor, yet gentle farming community was the backdrop into which Joseph Pairin Kitingan was born in 1940.

A place of pride for the Tambunan folk is the grave of Panglima Mat Salleh, the local warrior who was killed fighting the colonial British at the turn of the last century.

But few knew that in little Joseph Pairin they would see another folk hero emerge and many years from today, little stories about him would be spun into folk tales, and folk tales would, maybe, like Panglima Mat Salleh, become legend.

Pairin is not perfect. He has made his mistakes and he has paid for them dearly. Sabah has had many colourful leaders who have each stamped their mark on this mysterious, engaging land.

People like house-boy turned independence fighter turned Governor and Chief Minister Tun Datu Mustapha Harun died a lonely death.

The first post-independence, larger-than-life Kadazan hero, Tun Fuad Stephens, and his respected number two, Datuk Peter Mojuntin, died in a tragic air crash in 1976.

The enigmatic and unpredictable Datuk Harris Salleh, who held sway over Sabah politics for more than a decade into the 1980s, now in political wilderness.

Pairin, after a tumultuous 30-year political career which saw him humiliated, ostracised, charged with corruption, his aides and brother arrested for supposedly planning to secede Sabah from Malaysia, is now back, at 64, as Sabah's Deputy Chief Minister in the Barisan Nasional Government.

He is Huguan Siou, the paramount leader of the Kadazandusuns, a revered lifetime position, and he says he is "happy to be home again".

The journey "home" was tough and scattered with minefields. But as he sits back in his modest two-storey government office in Sembulan, Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan reflects on the past and says that in one part of his mind, "I feel we should have never left the Barisan.

"We are very happy to be back. Now, we can serve the people better."

Returning after a Government-sponsored law degree in Australia, Pairin was the first Kadazan lawyer in Sabah. In a then laggard community, sidelined, like others in the State, during British colonial rule, the Kadazandusuns looked up to Pairin.

Idealistic, despaired with the excesses of the Usno-led Sabah Government, he joined other idealists, like Stephens, Mojuntin and Harris, in forming the tacitly Federal-backed Berjaya party to contest in the 1976 state elections.

Berjaya won and Pairin became one of the young assistant ministers in a Government looking to bring development and to raise the lot of its people.

But tragedy struck too soon, wiping out half the leadership in the air crash, and Harris became Chief Minister. Pairin was made a minister and

his community made him Huguan Siou.

Maybe Pairin was moving too fast. Maybe he was too impatient in wanting to improve the lives of his fellow Kadazans. But he gained a reputation for always championing his community and in an atmosphere where multiracial slogans were the only acceptable rallying cry, his peers in Berjaya started whispering that he was a chauvinist.

At the 1983 Berjaya congress, Pairin, a vice-president, made a speech highlighting the plight of the Kadazandusuns. Harris, angered by Pairin's tone, stopped him from talking.

Pairin walked over to Harris, his party president, to apologise. But in full hearing of the party's delegates and leadership, Harris waved him away and told him, "You better resign."

Having endured months of humiliation, the normally gentle Pairin snapped.

"I said, 'Okay, I resign.' I took my papers and walked out and as I left the hall, the delegates from Tambunan walked out with me."

Public spats followed and finally, Berjaya submitted an undated resignation letter all its assemblymen had to sign, and vacated Pairin's Tambunan state seat, forcing a by-election.

Berjaya was all-powerful, having won almost 90 per cent of the 48 state seats in the 1981 state elections, and it was unthinkable for anyone to even consider winning as an independent against it.

But on Dec 30, 1984, the people of Tambunan rallied around their son and he soundly defeated his nephew Roger Ong-kili to win the Tambunan seat as an independent.

Unable to deal with defeat, Harris punished the people of Tambunan. He abrogated its district status, forcing people who had government business to go to Keningau, more than an hour away on unpaved, pebbled bad roads.

All development projects were halted and construction stopped mid-way on many government buildings. Overnight, Tambunan became a town where time stood still.

Pairin, meanwhile, applied to set up a new political party.

Sensing that there would be problems, Berjaya dissolved the State Assembly one year early and called for snap polls in April 1985.

Hearing no news of his application, Pairin heard that the then Deputy Prime Minister Datuk (now Tan Sri) Musa Hitam was in Boston and flew, for the first time ever, to the United States to beg Musa, also the Home Minister, to register the Parti Bersatu Sabah.

Musa made no promises but on March 6, Pairin received his approval. PBS won the election by a slim majority, but Pairin would have to wait to be Chief Minister.

Harris teamed up with Usno and together they went to the palace where Mustapha was sworn in as Chief Minister.

Musa, who was acting Prime Minister then, stepped in and stopped the process.

Later that night, Pairin rightly assumed his post.

The years that followed saw Sabah racked with riots, bomb explosions, instability until, finally, the PBS was accepted into the BN.

But relations with the federal leadership were never good.

In 1990, on the eve of the general election, Pairin's PBS did the unforgivable - it pulled out of the BN and backed Datuk Seri (now Tun) Dr Mahathir's arch rival, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, who had formed a new opposition alliance with Pas.

The PBS won. Tengku Razaleigh lost. The BN was still in power at the federal level. It all went downhill for Pairin and the PBS from there.

Why did he pull out? Any novice could have told Pairin that it was the worst political decision he could have made.

Pairin accepts blame. He says his top lieutenants, Tan Sri Bernard Dompok and Datuk Yong Teck Lee, were insistent on pulling out from the BN, and various reasons were given.

"Sentiments against federal leaders were strong and we felt that if we remained in the BN, the people would turn to the DAP in anger," Pairin says. "I was convinced of the rationale and agreed to pull out."

Does he regret that move?

Pairin thinks for a while and says: "Yes ...and no."

Yes, because he wanted good relations with the federal leadership and knew it was the wrong thing to do.

No, because had it not been for the pullout, he and his party and the federal leadership would not have been able to assess each other better and, finally, to set aside the misunderstandings and suspicions and become one family again in 2002.

The intervening years saw Pairin being charged with corruption, his aides, like Benedict Topin, Datuk Dr Maximus Ongkili and brother Datuk Jeffrey Kitingan, arrested under the Internal Security Act for alleged secession, his party breaking up with Yong, Dompok and Datuk Joseph Kurup who left to set up their own parties, and, finally, the PBS losing the elections to Umno.

Eventually, the PBS became a model opposition party, supporting the BN in policies it agreed with and opposing it otherwise. But the differences became fewer and fewer and, more and more, the PBS came out in support of the BN's Bills and policies.

In 2001, after much soul-searching, Pairin and Maximus decided that they could better serve their people and Sabah through the BN.

They took the awkward step of approaching the then Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to find ways of coming back into the fold.

After months of discussion with Abdullah's and Dr Mahathir's aides, Pairin and Maximus finally sought an appointment in November 2001, and were given it within days, to meet the Prime Minister and BN chairman to submit their application to rejoin the BN.

They were nervous. Jittery. Too many strong words had been exchanged in the last 11 years and they were unsure how Dr Mahathir would react.

They came first, asking to meet Abdullah before their 5pm appointment with the Prime Minister. Abdullah hosted them to a nasi kandar lunch and advised them to be patient as Dr Mahathir was a "kind and gentle man" and they should listen to his advice.

Dr Mahathir's political secretary, Datuk Johari Baharom, one of those instrumental in the negotiations to bring the PBS back, told them they had 10 minutes.

Pairin says he felt "emotional" as he walked into the Prime Minister's office with Maximus.

Ten minutes passed and the hoard of waiting officials and Press saw no sign of Pairin. The minutes ticked away and everyone started getting nervous.

Finally, 40 minutes later, Dr Mahathir opened his door, shook hands with Pairin and Maximus, and waved them farewell. Only then did Johari heave a sigh of relief, saying "Dr Mahathir rarely walks people to the door. It's done."

After speaking to the Press, Pairin left for the Equatorial Hotel where he was staying and, while in the car, he wept.

Dr Mahathir had set no conditions. All he wanted, Pairin says, was for the country and its people to be united and "he acknowledged us with open arms".

Pairin recalls that the air in the Prime Minister's office was filled

with "heavy emotions".

"The appointment was longer than what we were told. He gave us the strength and assurance and we believed.

"In one part of our mind, we felt we should never have left. We were very emotional. You can actually cry," Pairin says.

Three months later, Dr Mahathir managed to convince all the BN's component parties to accept the PBS back and in last month's general elections, the party played its role and delivered victory to the BN in all areas it contested.

Pairin became Deputy Chief Minister and Maximus a Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in charge of national unity and integration.

How does it feel?

"We want to move on. Time will tell that we will be loyal friends. We will continue to serve the people. In the BN, we can do it better."

Thirty years later, Joseph Pairin Kitingan of Tambunan has come home.