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Sabah's Chief Minister rotation system scrapped

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Sabah's 10-year-old system of rotating the chief minister's post every two years was scrapped yesterday, dismantling one of the major obstacles to continuity in economic planning.

After naming his Cabinet line-up, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi surprised many by announcing the end of the rotation.

He said all leaders of Barisan Nasional component parties in Sabah had put down in writing their desire to end the rotation among the three main racial groups: Malay Muslims, Kadazans and Chinese.

Datuk Musa Aman, whose term as chief minister would have ended in a year, will continue as the State's chief executive officer by virtue of his position as head of Sabah Umno, the dominant partner in the Sabah BN.

The rotation system was mooted and implemented by former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad after an electoral promise in the 1994 state election where the issue of race and who would lead the state became a major issue.

To ensure that none of the races felt left out, and to quell fears that a racial group would be left out should none of its community be chief minister, the rotation was seen then as the best way to keep everyone happy.

The strategy worked and in the 10 years the BN has been in power in Sabah, the State has had five chief ministers.

Parti Bersatu Sabah, which was then in the Opposition and opposed the rotation system, continued to express its views even after it was re-admitted to BN two years ago.

PBS president Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan and his deputy, Datuk Dr Maximus Ongkili, pledged to Tun Mahathir and Abdullah, the two men who were responsible for bringing the party back into BN, that they would support an Umno chief minister should the system be scrapped because Umno held the majority of seats in the Sabah assembly. PBS is the second largest component in the Sabah BN in terms of number of seats and its support was crucial for the rotation system to be scrapped.

Although the Liberal Democratic Party headed by Datuk Chong Kah Kiat was supportive of scrapping the system, the other three parties - Sabah People's Party (SAPP), and the two Kadazan-Murut-based parties, UPKO and PBRS - were not too keen initially and needed to be convinced.

After several rounds of discussions, they agreed with the majority view.

Although the system enabled electoral success, there was growing consensus over the years that it had become an impediment to development. Most of the previous chief ministers' said the two-year period in charge was too short to implement policy changes and carry through economic plans.

Much of the first year was spent settling into the new job, and by the time the second year came around, it was time to leave office.

Musa said that with the abolition of the system, Sabah could focus on development.

Pairin said: "We are happy that it has been scrapped as we can now concentrate on our jobs without having to debate anymore about rotation."