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Intense bid to oust Sabah incumbents

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THE assumption that the coming State election will be less exciting with the return of Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) into the Barisan Nasional has turned out to be wrong.

What perhaps makes the elections this time round no less interesting is not a keen fight between political parties but the intense campaigning by individuals and groups who are out to oust the incumbents.

Some groups and individuals were reported to have resorted to a systematic smear campaign designed to discredit the incumbents and ensure their "political demise".

All these political "happenings" have been widely reported in the local print media, especially in the vernacular newspapers.

Kudat Assemblyman Datuk Chong Kah Kiat, who is also Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) president and the immediate past Chief Minister, was reportedly among the targets of the so-called smear campaign.

The latest campaign targeting Chong was a poison-pen letter said to have been widely circulated in Kudat and the State capital, prompting the LDP's deputy youth chief Teo Chee Kang to lodge a police report.

The movement decided to report the matter to the police, claiming that it found all the allegations in the letter to be baseless and containing malicious elements.

"The campaign smacked of a conspiracy to resort to whatever means to bring down a Barisan Nasional leader and attack a BN component party (LDP) in the process," said Teo, who is a lawyer. Some quarters believed that members of another BN component party could be behind the distribution of the surat layang (poison-pen letters), which was apparently the second targeting Chong.

As such it was not surprising when State BN secretary Datuk Karim Bujang came out with a statement saying that the poison-pen letter should not have surfaced, adding that it was better for BN component parties to air their dissatisfaction through proper channels.

Before the poison-pen letter came to light, it was reported that a group of local BN leaders in Kudat had sent a memorandum to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Chief Minister Datuk Musa Aman requesting that the BN drop Chong in the next election.

However, Musa, when asked about the matter, said he was not aware of such a memo, adding that on the contrary, he received a letter urging that Chong be re-nominated as the BN candidate for Kudat.

Chong, currently the State Minister of Tourism, Culture and Environment, for reasons best known to him, has not publicly responded to the allegations hurled at him.

Another focus of political attention is in the Sook State constituency which looks set to become the battleground between Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS) president Tan Sri Joseph Kurup and his controversial former deputy Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan.

Kurup, the last Assemblyman for Sook before it was abolished during the redelineation of electoral boundaries in early 1990 but re-instated in the recent redelineation exercise, is strongly tipped to be the BN candidate for the seat. However, Jeffrey, currently the Bingkor Assemblyman, has publicly said that he will contest in Sook.

Jeffrey, who declared himself as a BN independent Assemblyman after his application to join other BN components, including Umno, was rejected,

claimed that the majority of the constituents in Sook had requested him to contest the seat.

In fact, Jeffrey had already set up an operation-cum-service centre in Sook, an indication of his seriousness to contest in the area.

Why must Jeffrey abandon his Bingkor seat and contest in Sook? According to political observers Jeffrey, a younger brother of PBS president Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan, is out to topple Kurup after failing to do so in the PBRS party election about two years ago.

They said Jeffrey has a political score to settle with Kurup for sacking him from the PBRS. If Kurup was chosen as the BN candidate, Jeffrey, said an observer, will fight him (Kurup) on an independent ticket.

The on-going tussle between the two contenders for the BN candidacy in Sook, has become very interesting as Jeffrey had been going around saying that he is all for the BN although he is not a member of the BN. What makes this "fight" even more interesting is that the BN leadership appears to be allowing Jeffrey to continue portraying himself as a BN independent Assemblyman.