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## Musa squashes talk of Sabah Cabinet reshuffle

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WITH Datuk Musa Aman already named as Sabah's next Chief Minister, questions are now being asked if there will be changes in the Cabinet when he takes over the State leadership.

Many are eager to know but Musa, who will have the prerogative to decide on his Cabinet line-up, is keeping the answer close to his chest.

"I have not yet thought about it. An announcement will be made when the time comes," was Musa's reply when asked to comment.

Musa takes over from Datuk Chong Kah Kiat, whose two-year term as Chief Minister ends on March 27, under a unique system of rotating the post among the Muslim Bumiputera, non-Muslim Bumiputera and Chinese.

The system was introduced by the Barisan Nasional when it took over the State administration in 1994.

Chong is on leave and Musa, who is Sabah Umno liaison committee chief and State Finance Minister, will be acting Chief Minister until he takes his oath of office on March 28.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced Musa's appointment as Chief Minister on March 4, putting an end to speculation about Chong's likely successor.

Some had interpreted Musa's response as a strong indication of a Cabinet shake-up because as a political observer remarked: "What is there to announce if there are no changes?"

The observer claimed a certain Sabah Umno leader had made frequent trips to Kuala Lumpur to lobby for the CM's post but Musa has denied this.

However, a source close to Musa said he (Musa) knew about it but as a responsible head of Sabah Umno, he had to plead ignorance to avoid unnecessary speculation and ensure that Sabah Umno remained united.

If indeed there was strong lobbying and if the leader concerned is a member of the State Cabinet, Musa may find it difficult to work with him.

"How could you expect Musa to work with a person who had been lobbying for the post," said the source, adding that by lobbying, the leader concerned was disregarding Musa's leadership as Sabah Umno chief.

Although no names were mentioned as to who had been lobbying for the Chief Ministership, Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Lajim Ukin had admitted he was among those who had been tipped for the post.

Lajim, however, said it was not just him who was mentioned as a potential candidate for the post as there were others - Local Government and Housing Minister Datuk Salleh Tun Said and Ministers in the Chief Minister's Department Datuk Abdul Ghapur Salleh, Assistant Minister to the Chief Minister Datuk Abdul Rahim Ismail and Sabah Assistant Finance Minister Datuk Hajiji Noor.

In any case, Lajim has pledged his undivided support to the incoming Chief Minister, putting to rest speculation that he had taken the decision of Musa's appointment badly.

But speculation is rife that Musa will make changes to the Cabinet that will involve the promotion of several senior assistant ministers and the inclusion of Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) representatives.

The PBS left the BN in 1990 but returned to the fold early last year.

PBS president Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan had made no secret of his party's hope of playing a role in the State administration.

"We are always prepared to serve in the Government if given a chance,"

said Pairin, who continues to command respect and strong support, especially among the Kadazandusuns.

As the second largest BN component party in Sabah after Umno, PBS' role in the State Government can help ensure a landslide victory for the BN in the next State elections as well as the parliamentary elections.

"The inclusion of PBS representatives in the Cabinet is crucial for the BN to face the State elections as a strong and united force," said a political analyst.

But to accommodate the inclusion of PBS representatives and the promotion of assistant ministers in the State Cabinet would mean dropping some of the present ministers.

If rumours are anything to go by, then at least three members of the Cabinet, including a senior minister, may be dropped to make way for the changes.

Among the assistant ministers' names being bandied about as "minister material" are Abdul Rahim, Hajiji and Assistant Tourism Development, Environment, Science and Technology Minister Datuk Karim Bujang.

All three have been assistant ministers since 1994 and hold key positions in Sabah Umno.

Rahim is Sabah Umno information chief and Hajiji its treasurer, while Karim is Sabah BN secretary.

From the PBS, the names being mentioned as candidates for a ministerial post are its deputy presidents Datuk Dr Maximus Ongkili and Dr Yee Moh Chai, and secretary-general Datuk Radin Malleh.

Ongkili is Tandek Assemblyman and Bandau MP, while Dr Yee is Api-Api Assemblyman and MP for Tanjung Aru. Malleh is Melalap Assemblyman.

They represent the second echelon leaders in the PBS who have remained loyal and steadfast to Pairin and the party.

PBS insiders said Pairin, being a former Chief Minister and seasoned politician, would be more suited for a federal post.