

Guessing game continues on state polls
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It has been a year when political pundits engaged in a guessing game of when the state election would likely be held - although the current term of the Sarawak state legislative assembly expires only in July next year.

But as the ruling BN and the opposition geared for the widely speculated polls, state BN chief Abdul Taib Mahmud, who will mark his 30th anniversary as chief minister on March 26, next year, is keeping the inevitable date close to his chest.

NONEThe only hint Taib has given so far, was that he had received the inspiration but stopped short of revealing the date when asked on the matter, upon his return from pilgrimage in Mecca last month.

The four-party state coalition, he said, was also willing to accomodate any request from Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak to hold the state and general elections simultaneously, should there be a need.

Taib appeared to be in favour of the general election being called at same time as the Sarawak polls.

"If Najib has the inspiration to hold the (general) election soon, it is probably better for both parties to synchronise it (with the state election)," said Taib, who supported the direct BN membership proposal as a possible answer to fielding a direct BN candidate in the coming polls.

He said such an approach would enable partyless Pelagus state assemblyman Larry Sng to remain in the BN when his political status became uncertain, following his sacking by Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS) due to insubordination. He stood under the PRS ticket in the 2006 state election.

At stake are 71 state constituencies for which 63 seats are now held by the Sarawak BN, including 35 seats by its backbone Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) led by Abdul Taib.

Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) initially held 11 seats but the official acceptance of BN-friendly Engkilili state assemblyman Dr Johnical Rayong Ngipa into the party and BN fold in October has increased its seats to 12, while PRS and Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) hold eight seats, respectively.

"The chief minister declared that I am a BN member during the BN pre-Council meeting (held a day before the last state assembly sitting) so now that I am accepted into the BN, I can do my work smoothly as people will no longer have doubts over my position," said Johnical, who stood under the opposition Sarawak National Party (SNAP) ticket in the last state election but later declared himself an independent.

The remaining eight seats are with DAP, which has six, PKR one, and one independent, while at the parliamentary level, BN controls 30 out of the 31 seats, with DAP one.

Sarawak may restrict entry of opposition

However, in the aftermath of the BN's failure to retain the Sibu parliamentary seat in the May 16 by-election, for which the opposition was blamed for employing new tactics to garner the voters' support, the state assembly passed a motion for the state government to prepare and publish a White Paper.

NONE In the three-cornered fight, DAP's Wong Ho Leng (right), who is also Bukit Assek state assemblyman, secured 18,845 votes to win the seat by a 398-vote majority, defeating Robert Lau Hui Yew of SUPP, who polled 18,447 votes and independent candidate Narawi Haron, who only managed 232 votes and lost his deposit.

Asajaya state assemblyman Abdul Karim Hamzah, in his winding-up speech after tabling the motion, said the proposed White Paper should be formulated by the state government as unhealthy trends had crept into the local political scene.

Touching on the issue, Abdul Taib said the White Paper could be implemented before or after the next state election as a preventive rather than a punitive measure or a political exercise.

"Sarawakians are known to be very friendly and peaceful people and such a document is necessary to prevent those from entering the state with ulterior motives," he said.

NONE Deputy Chief Minister Dr George Chan refuted concerns by certain quarters that the White Paper might be used by the authorities to restrict opposition leaders from entering Sarawak, saying it was not aimed at targeting anyone.

As the state tourism and heritage minister, he did not deny that wild allegations had been hurled, especially by irresponsible foreign non-governmental organisations, on the Penan issue and the timber industry, besides distorting facts to paint a wrong picture that the orang utan was endangered by the oil palm industry, in an effort to get the West to boycott the industry.

Investors, businessmen and bona fide tourists who were sincere in contributing towards the well-being of Sarawak and its people were always welcome, said Chan, who also holds the industrial development portfolio.

Massive logjam

This year also marked a milestone for Sarawak when the impoundment of the Bakun hydro electric dam started on Oct 13, which will flood an area in Belaga district covering 69,500 hectares, almost the size of Singapore.

The state government is in the process of finalising the acquisition of the controversial project from the Ministry of Finance Incorporated, which is expected to generate 2,400 megawatts (MW) of electricity when fully operational by 2012, from an initial 300 MW by June next year.

Developed by the Sarawak Hidro, the Bakun dam is the world's second tallest concrete rock-filled dam located on Balui River in the upper Rajang River basin.

Electricity supply from Bakun is expected to feed the power-hungry energy-intensive

industries being implemented under the Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (Score) initiative with future plans to build additional dams to produce 7,000 MW by 2020.

NONEThe Rajang River was again in the limelight when a massive logjam caused an estimated loss of RM2.7 million after two logging bridges and five clinics, as well as longhouse jetties, were awash with debris.

Chan said a 54-hour mammoth operation was involved to manoeuvre the logjam from the source at the Malataheli timber camp, about 75km upstream from Kapit to the river mouth of the country's longest river at Kuala Igan.

Far from being an ecological disaster as claimed by an overseas source, Sarawak Forestry chief executive officer Len Talif Salleh said it was a natural disaster caused by heavy downpour, and not by overlogging or impoundment of the Bakun dam.

Nevertheless, it did not deter the local Ibans from holding a grand 'miring' (an Iban traditional ritual) to appease the spirits of the rivers, jungles and mountains at Ulu Sungai Melatai to prevent another similar incident in the Baleh tributary.

- Bernama

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