

BN rep ready to spar with PKR over land rights
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Native customary rights (NCR) land has been an evergreen issue in rural constituencies during Sarawak's state elections. This coming 10th state election, there are indications it will be more pronounced.

NCR land is set to become the 'mother' of all issues when candidates romance the rural voters.

It becomes an issue, basically because some people are against the concept of commercial development on joint ventureship with the big players which they believe does not benefit the owners at all.

It is also an issue because the owners themselves are exasperated that the government does not recognise the NCR status they claim their land should have, and gives it to huge companies to develop, by virtue they are state land.

The state Land Code only recognises land occupied and cultivated before 1957 to be NCR land. Beyond this, the onus is on the owners to provide proof.

According to state PKR chief Baru Bian, there were not less than 200 pending court cases statewide over NCR land problems.

Eight-term Machan state constituency assemblyperson Gramong Juna, 64, is no stranger to facing NCR-related woes. There has been an endless stream of politicians trying to end his political career, beginning in the 2001 state election, just by capitalising on the NCR issue.

Gramong, who started his political career in 1987, is perhaps the only Dayak politician to have faced the most deleterious of attacks by anti-NCR land development activists and certain non-governmental organisations.

In his own words, he said he had "faced the worst and survived and now enjoy a sort of immunity."

It is largely in the confines of his Machan state seat in 1996 that the state's first pilot NCR land commercial development project was implemented.

The concept is noble and primarily to eradicate poverty among rural folks who are landowners. But like any thing new and revolutionary, it is largely misunderstood or purposely misinterpreted.

Gramong, a former educationist, had at the start, a very unenviable task in trying to convince owners to allow their land to be used.

"In the one year that he promoted it in interior longhouses, even normally docile grandfathers with crooked back, could suddenly turn ballistic.

"The way I saw it, the brave Iban men would rather lose their wives than their land... never mind that it is shrubland, secondary forestland or just weed field," noted a journalist used to

covering such functions in 1995 and early 1996.

It was against this background that Gramong had always been challenged in the elections, between 2001 and 2006.

Among very winnable BN candidates

Deeply frustrated and embittered, he once told the journalist that he would "rather be a politician who lost the election for trying to sincerely help the people, rather than be one who won but did nothing."

In the 2001 election, widely thought would be his 'waterloo', Gramong overcame the odds with style and elegance. He won with a 2,433 votes majority against a former varsity lecturer, Alau Tayan, who garnered only 1,798.

A third candidate, an independent, could only obtain 504.

Meanwhile, at a gathering in Machan town hall, two weeks ago, about 100 community leaders from his area had gathered to hear from the man, on whether he would stay on. They wanted him to stay on.

The grapevine has it that among veteran politicians from the Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), the state BN anchor party, facing the chop this coming election.

A 'penghulu' (village headman) who declined to be identified said there was little doubt Gramong was among the very winnable candidates for the BN.

"The people have expressed their wish. They are after all, the ones who will make the decision.

"Frankly, the body may be weak but the fire is still burning inside me to continue to serve... but I have not been told whether to step down or not," said Gramong when met later.

"Before I call it quits, I want to ensure those in the interior will have access to more interior roads, water and power supplies, and for the children to have the best education."

Gramong said he was relieved that Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin wanted a standard pay structure for oil palm workers in the country.

"With better pay, the locals would be willing to work in our plantations and the country need not rely on tens of thousands of foreign workers," he noted.

Meanwhile, word on the street is that PKR plans to put up a candidate against him. So, is Parti Cinta Malaysia (PCM). So far, another state opposition party, the Sarawak National Party (Snap) has remained silent.

Gramong is simple in his confidence. "Let the best man win," he said.

According to state land and survey department director Sudarsono Osman, the government had spent RM20 million last year on perimeter survey to cover 27 areas statewide, spanning 20,703 hectares out of the estimated 1.5 million hectares.

"This year, the target is another 107 areas covering 386,000 hectares and the exercise is to

wind up by 2015," he said.

On poverty, Gramong said there were pockets of poverty which the government was dealing with, through its e-kasih programme and other relevant programmes.

- Bernama

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