

Sarawak's PRS - From 'sick man' to 2nd strongest party

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ANALYSIS It has been quite a remarkable journey for Sarawak's youngest political party, the Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS).

Cynics regarded it as the "sick man" of the state Barisan Nasional when it was registered on Oct 21, 2004 following a bitter leadership struggle that earlier led to the deregistration of Parti Bansa Dayak Sarwak (PBDS).

The tag remained not for long however as the party stabilised about four years later.

Now, seven years on, it has metamorphosed into the state's second strongest party.

This may be by default rather than design. This throne, for years, belonged to another component party, the Chinese-majority but multi-racial Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP).

In the last state election in April, SUPP had the misfortune of losing 13 urban seats to the opposition DAP, leaving it with only five seats besides its four parliamentary seats.

In comparison, PRS has eight state and six parliamentary seats.

Its president, Dr James Jemut Masing, attributes its current strength to the desire of leaders to remain together.

"We manage to remain together while political parties around us are cracking. This is where our advantage is. That is why I say we are the second strongest now by default rather than by design.

"Unless we learn to think as a group, we will be subjected to disintegration by those hostile to us. Therefore the Dayak community must learn to think as a group and to remain together as a group," he told Bernama in a recent interview.

"Once we can sit down together and agree to be different, let us look for the solution we can all agree upon.

"It may not be the best solution but at least it is the one that we all can agree upon in order for us to remain together. Nothing is more important than this," said Masing who is also the state Land Development Minister.

PRS is a multi racial party although its key leaders are from the Dayak community and a big chunk of its members are bumiputera.

On Oct 21, it will celebrate its seventh anniversary in a grand manner. It has booked two floors of a restaurant in Sibu's biggest hotel for the occasion.

Strength from Dayak unity

Acknowledging that PRS' strength also comes from the unity of the Dayak population, Masing fears for internal problems within the community which he believes will impact it.

"Now there is the danger people will come in and try to break this up.

"But at the same time, I am quite optimistic the Dayak community will remain good because we have more and more intelligent people coming in... they realise the need for us to remain together so that we can be strong," he said.

PRS, too, is in the process to engage "some of those people" inclusive of Dayak intellectuals, who are still hostile to it and the BN, to find out the reasons for such attitude.

"They may have been misinformed. They may have been fed the wrong information because nowadays we have the omnipresent Internet where a lot of information are delivered and a lot may not be the whole truth. People may just pick and choose what they want to hear.

"As leaders, they must accept we make mistakes. I say at all times that I always stand to be corrected. If I am wrong, you tell me. Then let us find the solution for Sarawak to move forward. If I am right, you must accept it," he said.

He considered the Native Customary Right (NCR) land issues and the distribution of opportunities to the Dayaks as most close to PRS.

"Once we can tackle them properly, we'll be home and dry. We are tackling it; and the security of land, I think, is slowly coming with the perimeter survey," Masing, who is Balleh state assemblyperson, said.

NONEConcurring with his president's view on PRS stability, a senior vice-president, Joseph Salang (right), said at the moment he did see any possible crack or disunity in the party.

"Everyone is keeping to his or her duties to make sure PRS remain intake. I do not think there is going to be a repeat of the leadership crisis in PBDS, its defunct predecessor.

"Everyone is working to cement unity in the party," he said.

Salang, who is Deputy Information, Communications and Culture Minister, said people might have his or her ambition sometime or all the time.

But there is the greater importance that should be placed on the ambition, aspiration and need of the community, he added.

"I think we all understand this. So I think as far as my view is concerned, PRS is now in a very blissful situation," he said.

'PRS is not a Dayak NGO'

On views that the party has failed to sufficiently articulate Dayak interests, Salang said people must remember PRS is not a Dayak NGO.

"It is a political party. It is a member of Barisan Nasional. It is also a multi-racial party. Thus while we in PRS empathise with problems and issues the Dayaks face, we cannot be fighting for them solely.

"We must also struggle for fairness and equity for the state and country. It is sad if people think that as politicians we must fight for the Dayaks alone. This is wrong.

"Any intellectual worth his grain of salt would not think this is the proper thing to do. A Dayak leader is also a state leader and if he is a member of the federal cabinet, he is also a federal leader," he said.

"Once you are in such positions, you are not only representing the Dayaks.

"It is for the Dayak intellectuals to form their own NGO to struggle for Dayak rights. We as the political representatives we will try and perhaps help them out in our own little ways, provided their issues are

reasonable.”

On whether the Dayak community have generally embraced PRS as a worthy successor to PBDS, Salang said all the seats contested by PBDS were now contested and won by PRS.

“Some of us may not be the founding members of PRS but we all subscribe to it as the umbrella body for all the seats. Besides, we have come to a stage where we have learnt that we do not gain anything, and the community will lose, in any squabble involving leaders.

“So the best thing, yes... there maybe some unhappiness, some uneasiness among members but these are individual feelings which must always be subservient to the community's feelings,” he said.

Both Masing and Salang are very optimistic PRS will be able to keep its Lubok Antu, Julau, Kanowit, Selangau, Lubok Antu and Sri Aman seats in the coming parliamentary election.

“The people know what they want... the Dayaks especially know they do not want instability in politics.

“They also know that political trouble at the federal level may cause uncertainty and may possibly retard the development that the BN government is trying to bring to rural areas,” Salang said.

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