

Rebel duo adds to fragmented Sabah opposition

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By Nigel Aw

While the defection of two Sabah MPs from BN may have left ruling coalition leaders red-faced, the move may prove a bane for the already fragmented Sabah opposition.

Yesterday, Beufort MP Lajim Ukin and Tuaran MP Wilfred Bumburing formally pledged their support for Pakatan Rakyat after renouncing the BN and their respective parties, Umno and Upko.

Under the umbrella of Sabah Reform Front (SRF), Lajim will lead the Pakatan Perubahan Sabah (PPS) while Bumburing will take charge of Angkatan Perubahan Sabah (APS) to help shore up support for Pakatan in Sabah.

But not unlike SAPP - which in 2008 ditched BN and declared itself a Pakatan-friendly party but went on to contest against Pakatan in the three cornered fight at the Batu Sapi by-election - SRF may well become another headache.

"It will have more problems because on top of PPS and APS, you have SAPP, Star, Pakatan, UBF, the opposition (in Sabah) is in a mess," said UiTM Sabah political scientist Arnold Puyok when contacted.

Arnold who had predicted the rise of PPS and APS before it was announced yesterday said a further polarised opposition in Sabah now would mean attempting to bargain with each other for a united front in the general election, would be even more difficult.

Echoing this, Unimas political scientist Jeniri Amir (left) said problems will arise if both Lajim and Bumburing want to defend their seats in the next general election while remaining Pakatan-friendly, thereby unsettling aspiring local Pakatan candidates.

"It will all depend on how Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim can negotiate with the local leaders to iron out the problem," he said when contacted.

Shaking BN's local support

However, Jeniri added that Lajim and Bumburing may be able to inflict some damage to BN in their local constituencies.

"I don't think Lajim's influence in his constituency should be underestimated. He has very strong grassroots support and the common touch. If BN does not put up someone winnable or on par with him, BN is going to face an uphill battle," he said.

Nonetheless, he added that the influence of the duo does not extend beyond their constituency as BN continues to have a strong grip on the state.

Similarly, Arnold said Bumburing will be able to bring with him some supporters from Upko and extent of damage inflicted to the party will manifest over time, though the damage to BN itself remains to be seen.

Asked to explain the rational of Lajim and Bumburing having separate vehicles even though they were part of the same movement, Arnold said: "I think Anwar (right) wants to use PPS to go into Kadazan-Dusun areas and APS to go into Malay areas.

"For now they cannot do it with Pakatan because some local Sabah voters have ill feelings towards peninsula-based parties. So the local coalition will go in," said the Sabah-based political scientist.

'New vehicle, old ideas'

However, Arnold said Bumburing's attempt to garner the Kadazan-Dusun vote for Pakatan will not be easy as Sabah veteran politician Jeffrey Kitingan who leads the Sabah chapter of State Reform Party (Star) continues to remain largely popular among the community.

Similarly, he said the local Malay votes may prove challenging for Lajim as he has yet to be able to offer anything fresh to the Sabah electorate that sets the movement apart in the opposition.

"Many of the offers have already been said by other opposition parties in Sabah," he said.

Arnold had earlier predicted that the opposition stood a chance in snatching 13 of 22 Sabah parliamentary seats currently held by the ruling coalition in the traditional BN stronghold described as a 'fixed deposit'. Sabah has a total of 25 parliamentary seats.

"Three of the seats, the opposition can easily win but 10 others are marginal seats which the opposition stand a chance if they avoid multi-cornered fights.

"They (opposition) have better chances there even though it is not going to be easy," he said.