

## **Can Taib hold on if Pakatan wins?**

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**By Keruah Usit**

ANTIDOTE The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to be nothing, have no place in it.

The opening line of VS Naipaul's novel 'A Bend in the River' might well be the motto inscribed on the family crest of Sarawak's Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud, who has been our own homegrown 'Big Man' for the past 32 years.

Taib has good reason to be anxious over his future. He was concerned enough to respond to a secretly filmed Global Witness video. On each of the 750,000 views on YouTube since the video's release on March 19, Taib's conceited family members and business associates have blurted out stupid and damning admissions of corruption in Sarawak.

The chief minister, 77, made a haughty and clumsy defence on pro-BN blog The Mole on April 1, knowing he would not be asked awkward questions. He insisted, apparently with a straight face, that the startling conversations about bribery and cronyism were "normal business practice".

When asked for his response to detailed allegations of graft on Sarawak Report, Taib's candid admission - delivered without any apparent irony - was, "if we were to reply, there will be too many of it [sic]. It's too much to do."

Reports of Taib's impending political demise are greatly exaggerated.

As long as Sarawakians can remember, there have been rumours that Taib would shortly be overthrown, or die from bowel cancer. Some of these tales originated from Taib's own camp, to lure potential rivals into open revolt so that he could cut down the tall poppies in his BN coalition.

The old patriarch may dismiss his critics as "naughty", but he is far from simple-minded. His political acumen, overflowing war chest, and ruthless removal of all serious political rivals, have ensured his stubborn survival.

Yet Taib has seen long-lived strongmen humiliated, including former Indonesian president Suharto, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos and Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. He must be preparing for the outcome of the coming 13th general election.

There are four outcomes that Taib must weigh up - a BN win, a narrow Pakatan majority, a Pakatan landslide victory, or a hung parliament.

Taib's four outcomes

If BN wins, Taib will continue business as usual. He would hope to end his prickly relationship with now caretaker premier Najib Abdul Razak. Najib previously called on Taib - thought to be a political liability at the time - to resign in 2011, but has since changed his tune this year. Najib is banking on Taib to deliver a large chunk of seats, in a desperate push to restore BN's two-thirds 'super-majority' so that Najib can retain the Umno presidency.

Taib may be happiest if Najib wins a simple majority, and Muhyiddin Yassin takes over the premiership. Taib also enjoys close ties with Muhyiddin's backer, ex-PM Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Taib will press them both to support his installation as Sarawak's governor. He will then manipulate his weak successor as CM, Alfred Jabu, from behind the scenes until his son Mahmud Bekir or cousin Norah Abdul Rahman, can step up to resume his family's dynastic control.

Taib was handed the CM's post by his uncle and predecessor, Abdul Rahman Ya'akub, Norah's father. Ya'akub (second from left in photo) was made governor to guarantee that his children remained rich and well-connected, as two of his daughters demonstrated in the Global Witness video.

The Conference of Rulers has objected in the past to Taib's appointment as governor. His limited imagination can see no alternative exit plan to becoming governor, in imitation of his uncle.

Taib may see his family as a true royal dynasty, since they have accumulated political authority and wealth that Sultans in the peninsular can only dream of.

If Pakatan wins a small majority, Taib will remain as CM since his term of office only expires in 2016. He would be under intense pressure to resign, but would probably cling on. He would then try to win the next state election using his immense wealth, or hope that Pakatan's lawmakers defect to BN, as three did in Perak in 2009. He would still face prosecution.

"Pakatan will ask the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) to do its job without fear or favour. We will allow a free media to cover the investigations fully. We feel that with this two-pronged approach, the CM should feel morally obliged to vacate his post pending the outcome of an investigation," chairperson of PKR's Trade and Investment Bureau Wong Chen (left), told Malaysiakini.

"I don't think corruption or corrupt leaders will go away overnight with a change of government," pointed out secretary-general of Transparency International-Malaysia Josie Fernandez.

"It will not be easy to remove a powerful, rich, corrupt leader. Has power made him untouchable?"

"However, timing is important - a new prime minister must use the winning moment and

should demonstrate the political will to demand that Taib steps down during investigations. Perhaps people power in Sarawak will have to be mobilised to end corruption with impunity," she said.

'MACC must be revamped'

Fernandez suggested new legislation, perhaps a Leadership and Integrity Bill, to compel politicians under a cloud of suspicion of graft to take a leave of absence during investigation.

The MACC would need to be revamped at all levels and made truly independent, she added, with strengthened staff - including forensic accountants and lawyers.

"Plea bargaining is a possibility, to bring back money stashed away abroad," Fernandez said.

"But this did not work in the case of Marcos in the Philippines. Pakatan should look at South Korea and Taiwan, (and) how they dealt with corrupt leaders."

Wong Chen agreed that the idea of plea bargaining and an amnesty might be considered if there is an admission of wrongdoing, and if the stolen money is returned.

"There are some in Pakatan Rakyat who want to see a 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission', like that of post-apartheid South Africa, to deal with the issue of systemic corruption. This is motivated by the fact that it is always better to move the country forward than to seek revenge."

If Pakatan wins by a landslide, Taib's position as CM would be untenable, and he would probably be forced to decamp to Australia (he has studied law in Adelaide and retains strong financial links there), or Canada, where his daughter Jamilah owns a property empire.

The last possibility is that the election results are inconclusive.

Taib is not standing for Parliament, but may try to dictate terms to allow his BN MPs to defect to Pakatan. Can Taib then hop over to become part of a Pakatan government?

"We do not foresee any deals with CM Taib to form the next government," PKR's Wong Chen stated briefly.

"Such a scenario has been discussed," Fernandez said, "and some are calling it 'a political reality'... but Pakatan will lose credibility if it takes this path".

Sarawak PKR vice-chairperson See Chee How agreed that much speculation had been fuelled by a nail-biting GE13 contest.

"I would put my faith in Anwar Ibrahim to stand firm on his political convictions and

commitment to the Malaysian rakyat," See emphasised.

"But if the results are very close, I would think that many BN lawmakers will want to switch camp of their own accord and support Anwar to be the next PM," he continued.

"Many BN MPs are well aware that our country is in the doldrums thanks to the misrule of current BN leaders."

Taib's future after GE13 remains hazy, but one thing is certain - the 'Big Man' will not allow himself to be nothing.

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