

Sabahans in search of their lost 'tataba'

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COMMENT 'Tataba' is a magic wand in Dusun mythology. However, it is no longer used by the Kadazandusun community in these modern times, having got lost in the midst of the advancement of their socio-cultural life.

The Kadazandusun are now looking for a different kind of tataba - one that propelled them to prominence in the early 1960s and 1980s. The elusive tataba that the Kadazandusun have been looking for, after losing it in 1994, is the oft-repeated and over-used word, 'unity'.

Recently, the three Kadazandusun-based parties in Sabah - PBS (Parti Bersatu Sabah), Upko (United Pasok Momogun Organisation) and PBRs (Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah) - held a gathering at the famed Kadazandusun Cultural Association building in Penampang.

The "misompuru" (unity meet) is widely seen as a symbolic event to rekindle the Kadazandusun nationalistic movement during the eras of Donald Stephens and Joseph Pairin Kitingan (left).

Stephens formed Upko in the early 1960s to represent the Kadazans at the height of the formation of Malaysia in 1963. Pairin formed PBS in 1985 as a response to Berjaya's pro-federal policies that caused the Kadazandusuns to lose their cultural significance.

In 1968, Stephens dissolved Upko in the name of "indigenous unity" after failing to prevent its members from joining Usno (United Sabah National Organisation), a Muslim-based party led by Mustapha Harun. Stephens joined Usno with the remaining members of Upko. This was generally regarded as the end of Kadazandusun pre-eminence.

In 1985, the Kadazandusuns once again had the chance to exert their influence through PBS. Despite PBS's multiracial outlook, it was mainly a Kadazandusun-based party. Pairin, who formed and led PBS was also (and still is) the Huguang Siou (paramount leader) of the Kadazandusun.

At the same time, Pairin also led the KCA (Kadazan Cultural Association, now called Kadazandusun Cultural Association). This gave Pairin enormous influence over the Kadazandusun community.

PBS push for more recognition annoyed Mahathir

Under Pairin, PBS won the successive state elections in 1986, 1990 and 1994. PBS was fighting along state issues and wanted the federal government to restore the 20 Point Memorandum and to give more recognition to the Malaysia Agreement of 1963. Such strong regional overtones, however, irked the then Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who

regarded Pairin as a "dangerous" regional leader.

When PBS failed to force the federal government to accede to its demands, it left BN in 1990 at the eleventh hour before nomination for the 1990 general election. This angered Mahathir, who called Pairin's action a "stab in the back". Sabah was under the opposition PBS until 1994.

Despite PBS being democratically elected, it was treated indifferently by the federal government. Federal allocations were cut off substantially and Pairin, on a number of occasions, was even snubbed by federal officials despite his role as Sabah chief minister-elect.

By 1994, federal influence in Sabah had become more pronounced, with Umno's entry into local politics. Usno was effectively dissolved and its members joined Umno en masse. In the 1994 state election, PBS won once, but with a razor-thin majority and formed the next government.

But with only a two-seat majority in the state legislative assembly, PBS failed to prevent its members from leaving the party. Two of Pairin's deputies and founding members of PBS Bernard Dompok (right) and Joseph Kurup also left PBS. With the massive exodus, PBS's nine-year rule ended abruptly.

James Chin wrote that the fall of PBS in 1994 signified the "end of Kadazan unity". After almost 12 years in the opposition, PBS returned to BN in 2002. There is no better explanation as to why PBS decided to be part of the ruling party once again, other than its desire to survive. Since then, the Kadazandusuns are represented by PBS, Upko and PBRs.

At the recent misompuru, Pairin, Dompok and Kurup saw eye to eye once again. The rendition of PBS's official anthem, Bersatu, took Pairin, Dompok and Kurup back to the heydays of the PBS in the 1980s. However, Dompok and Kurup did not show any sign of regret in ditching PBS. Neither was Pairin apologetic about his failure to prevent his two deputies from leaving.

No new vision at 'misompuru'

Obviously, the three Kadazandusun leaders did not use the misompuru to set a new vision to develop the Kadazandusun community. Kurup, who was given the opportunity to talk first, did not mince his words in saying that it was about time the Kadazandusun-based parties united after a long separation.

Dompok, who is seen as more vocal in championing the Kadazandusun cultural rights, spoke at length about the illegal immigrant problems. He also suggested that the MyKad be re-issued so that only genuine Sabahans are recognised as citizens. Pairin was clearly not as combative as he used to be in the 1980s. Reading from a prepared text, Pairin did not offer any new idea on the future direction of the Kadazandusun.

Despite the "success" of the misompuru, Pairin, Dompok and Kurup (second from left) failed to convince the Kadazandusun that they are willing to walk the talk in achieving real Kadazandusun unity. The misompuru is largely seen as an attempt to consolidate the Kadazandusun support in BN.

In the past months or so, the Kadazandusun have been quite unhappy with the failure of their leaders to speak up on issues such as the illegal immigrants, cultural rights of the Kadazandusun and the under-representation of the Kadazandusun in the state and federal service.

The BN is also wary of the split in Kadazandusun support after the formation of Star Sabah, led by Pairin's younger brother Jeffrey Kitingan. Not all Kadazandusun support Jeffrey but he has a substantial number of loyal Kadazandusun supporters in the interior.

In the end, many Kadazandusun were left disappointed despite the "historic" misompuru. PBS, Upko and PBRS are set to remain as they are for the time being. There is no sign that either Pairin, Dompok or Kurup is willing to step down as presidents of their respective parties, nor is there any indication that they are willing to form a single entity to represent the Kadazandusun.

For some people, Kadazandusun unity can only be achieved if Dompok and Kurup return to PBS. At the very least, many Kadazandusun want the three Kadazandusun leaders to set aside their ego and to form a new entity led by young and progressive Kadazandusun blood. Otherwise, the Kadazandusun will never ever find the lost tataba.