

Taib has 'last laugh', strengthens grip on S'wak

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Calls for Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud to step down have faded after the massive victory that his party Parti Pesaka Bumiputra Bersatu (PBB) and Sarawak BN registered in federal and state elections respectively.

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak political scientist Dr Faisal S Hazis noted that PBB delivered all 14 parliamentary seats it contested in GE13, held on May 5 this year, while Sarawak BN had grabbed 25 of the 31 state seats in the 2011 state polls.

"The calls began to fade even before (GE13). Taib now has the upper hand and the last laugh. He will go of his own accord and only his health can make him go," he told Malaysiakini.

NONEBN head and premier Najib Abdul Razak had attempted before the state polls to break Taib's grip on power, after corruption allegations mounted against the chief minister and members of his family who are in control of significant business interests.

However, the federal election results have made PBB the second biggest party in the BN, replacing the MCA which only won seven parliamentary seats.

"I would not be surprised if Taib stays beyond the next state election," said Faisal, also noting that he expects the veteran leader to defend the PBB presidency in the party polls in October.

Whether Taib will name his successor then will be worth watching, he said, especially now that pressure is building on him to reveal his choice of candidate.

Neither of the two deputy presidents are the first choice of either Taib or the Malay-Muslim grassroots, Faisal said.

"Deputy chief minister and deputy president I Alfred Jabu Numpang is from the Pesaka wing. He is expected to take the top post if something happens to Taib.

NONE"But there are worries among the Malay-Muslim grassroots in the Bumiputera wing that they could lose power to other communities."

PBB was formed through a merger of Parti Pesaka and Parti Bumiputera in 1973.

Deputy president II Abang Abdul Rahman Zohari Tun Openg (right) is not favoured by Taib either, but is preferred by the BN because of his cleaner image, said Faisal.

He was first elected to the post in 1998 when he stood against and defeated Adenan Satem, who had Taib's support.

Likely successor

Vice-president Awang Tengah Ali Hasan - a known Taib loyalist - could make the cut as the new president, said Faisal, but Taib will have to ensure there is sufficient time to groom the next party head.

NONE However, Awang Tengah (left) does not have a strong grassroots following because he was recruited by Taib from the civil service and is not a career politician who has worked his way up the ranks.

"The culture of patronage politics is deeply embedded in Sarawak. When a strongman goes, the party will collapse as happened to Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS) which was led by Leo Moggie Irok," Faisal noted.

For this reason, grassroots leaders may even want Taib, 77, to remain chief minister, a post he has held since 1981. He is the nation's longest serving chief minister.

Should Taib decide to step down, said Faisal, he and his family could be vulnerable to action or retaliation. As such, he will have to secure their interests before quitting politics.

PBB secretary-general Stephen Rundi has reportedly said he believes it will be status quo for the top post, and others echo the view.

Supreme council member and Kapit MP Alexander Nanta Linggi said there is no need for Taib to name a successor as he is not under pressure to do so, while the party is confident that he will arrange the succession in due course.

taib mahmud responds to global witness report story The grassroots will respect any decision that Taib makes - he "is most welcome to stay on, but if he wishes to retire, he is still needed to provide guidance," said the Kapit MP.

The party polls are expected to see minimal contest since Taib will have a strong say in the process, said Faisal, and there are few indications yet that the top posts

will be challenged.

To date, only Daud Abdul Rahman and Rohani Abdul Karim have expressed their wish to defend their posts as vice-presidents.

PBB, the backbone of the Sarawak BN, has five elected vice presidents - three from the Bumiputera wing and two from Pesaka.

"(Most of) the leaders have yet to make their decision known as to whether (or not) they want to defend their posts. (This is because) they are still waiting for Taib to send out the signal," added Faisal.

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