

**Sabah politics heats up over stalled Mazu statue**  
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Sabah's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) wants heads to roll over the stalled Mazu statue project in Kudat, initiated by former Sabah chief minister Chong Kah Kiat, among others. They allege that the case reeks of an "exercise in absolute power" and "gross abuse of power" on the part of the state authorities.

NONThe predicament of the stalled Mazu (Goddess of the Sea) statue, according to them, is a symbol of "these abuses".

As a case in point LDP deputy president Chin Su Phin cited the resignation last year of the state attorney-general Anthony Roderic @ Manthopil Fernandez, on the day that he was supposed to testify at the High Court in Kota Kinabalu in the Mazu case.

"After his resignation, he came back as legal consultant to the state government, having the same position as the state AG," said Chin. "The state AG's position meanwhile remains vacant."

He was disappointed that the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) parties in Sabah "were not working together as one family" following the Mazu affair, saying many LDP leaders including himself had been sacked from their government positions in recent months and replaced by non-LDP members.

Chin was responding to strident calls in the media by some of their BN comrades for Chong to accept the state government's offer to compensate and relocate the stalled project.

Politicising the issue

Chin, like his party members, does not see relocation as the issue. "Don't try to confuse the people and try to turn the Mazu issue into something else."

The LDP leaders point out that the planned statue is located far from other areas occupied by other religious groups, and therefore does not encroach on "religious sensitivities", further stressing the federal constitution's Article 11 guarantee of freedom of religion.

NONThe party therefore wants the merits of the work stoppage order on the project to be reviewed by a competent body "before the relocation offer is considered".

"The entire merit of the various and shifting grounds which the state government used to bring works on the Mazu project to a halt need to be considered," said Tanjung Kapor LDP chief Teo Chee Kang. "The merits of the work stoppage order on the Mazu statue project must be disposed of one way or other."

What the court focussed on, said Teo, was merely a technicality; that is, the non-registered status of the Kudat Thean Hou Charitable Foundation chaired by Chong.

The Court of Appeal and the Federal Court, pointed out Teo, did not rule on the project, "but merely focussed on the locus standi of Chong in bringing a case against the state government over the work stoppage order on the Mazu works."

Teo argues that since the former CM initiated the project, "No one could have more locus standi than him. The courts denied him locus standi by linking him with the unregistered status of the foundation."

More red tape

Meanwhile, Chin notes the implications of the controversy can be seen in the state government's new policy that "all development plans in Sabah must now be approved by the state cabinet after going through the Central Planning Board".

He charged that this change of policy has led to serious red tape in the processing and approval of development plans, apart from causing unnecessary delay and inconvenience to developers.

NONE "If this practice is not reverted, it will certainly promote more bureaucracy and slow down development in the state," said Chin. "Processing and approval for development plans in Sabah now takes one year or more."

LDP president V K Liew, however, thinks that not all is lost in the case of the Mazu project.

"We may be able to move on. We have yet to exhaust all avenues to settle this longstanding issue," said Liew. "A political solution is probably the best consideration given the circumstances surrounding the Mazu statue project."

But Liew stressed that there must be political will to make a difference in the deadlock.

He did not specify what kind of political solution he expected, since Chong has already declared that he will not budge from the original site unless the state government can prove him wrong.

Liew, who is also federal deputy minister in the Prime Minister's Department, cautioned that what has happened in Kudat will go down in history, and will exonerate the conscience, the good deeds and sincerity of Chong.

"At the same time, history will gauge and judge those who have oppressed him in his cause and struggle," he said. "History will judge our actions, our deeds and our sincerity. We can learn from a Malay proverb: 'gajah mati meninggalkan gading, harimau mati meninggalkan belang, manusia mati meninggalkan nama' (an elephant dies leaving its tusks, a tiger dies leaving its stripes, a man dies leaving his name)."

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