

SUPP visits Putrajaya - history repeating itself?

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COMMENT It really comes as no surprise that the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) leaders held an emergency meeting yesterday with Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak in Putrajaya. It is not known how long the meeting with Najib lasted and whether it went as planned. A shroud of secrecy surrounds the impromptu meeting.

The party has walked down this path before with former prime minister Hussein Onn.

hussein onnIn 1980/81, SUPP secretary-general Stephen Yong led a similar delegation of party leaders to meet Hussein (right) regarding the growing political instability in Sarawak.

That meeting contrasts with SUPP's current moves to put Putrajaya in the picture on the current political situation in Sarawak.

It was simpler in those days. The SUPP had demanded the removal of Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Rahman Ya'kub, a Melanau Dayak, or the SUPP would quit the BN.

Rahman was a proxy groomed by prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, who paved the way for Rahman's family to seize political control of Sarawak on the basis that a Muslim must be the chief minister. Tunku's successors continued the policy of the federal government's proxy control of Sarawak by using the minority Muslim Melanau in general and Rahman's family in particular.

The SUPP stand then was that Rahman was sidelining the Chinese community in the economic management of the state. Nepotism, cronyism, collusion and corruption were serious issues. Land was another grievance of the Chinese community.

The party was also bitter over Rahman's overzealousness in embarking on virtually forced conversions of non-Muslims to Islam. This affected the Dayaks - who formed a third of the SUPP membership although poorly represented in the party leadership line-up - the most.

Rahman fought his removal by organising mass rallies in Sarawak and himself spoke at a 50,000 strong rally at the old Kuching Airport thundering defiance against the federal government and SUPP, but to no avail. The federal government decided to abandon Rahman as long as it did not risk its control over Sarawak.

Out of the frying pan...

siby by-election nomination day 080510 mahmud taib 02Finally, Rahman had to step down but not before he demanded that his nephew, Taib Mahmud (right), be appointed as his successor and that he become the Governor. Rahman's stint as Governor was short-lived as SUPP prevailed on Taib to remove him.

Many Malays and some Dayak leaders were bitter over Rahman's removal and complained that the Chinese leaders had benefited more than them under his leadership. They saw SUPP's complaints as a bid to cut them down to size and deny their empowerment and economic rise.

Rahman is credited with enriching a handful of hand-picked Dayak leaders at the expense of the community. He cast the net wider among the Malay community however, and unlike

Taib has not been noted for favouring the Muslim Melanau at the expense of the former.

SUPP has generally been happy with Taib's land policies until recently, when the urban Chinese were asked to renew their land lease agreements at exorbitant rates. Taib reportedly told the Chinese, "Take it or leave it. Other people can pay for the land (if the Chinese do not want it)."

NONE In the wake of the defeat in the Sibü by-election this year, the state government has embarked on a policy of selective discounts, determined by the Land Office, for the renewal of land leases. This excludes those who voted against the BN.

Generally, Taib did not repeat some of Rahman's "mistakes". He kept Islam on the back-burner in the overwhelmingly non-Muslim majority Sarawak. He also cut out the Malay community except in government jobs or the token scholarships and kept the Dayaks even poorer while taking away their land under one pretext or another.

The result was the infamous 1987 Malay-Dayak revolt against Taib, who with an eye for newspaper headlines, dubbed it the Ming Court Affair. This was the name of the hotel in Kuala Lumpur where the Parti Bangsa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS) and Malay dissidents from Taib's Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) met to consider a no-confidence motion against Taib in the state assembly. The Dayaks and the Melanau in PBB stayed out.

SUPP an unlikely opponent

Now, it's the turn of the Chinese to complain about Taib. The Dayaks and Malays are cynically looking on from the sidelines and quietly applauding them.

NONE SUPP patently blames Taib for DAP making increasing inroads in Sarawak. They feel implicated by the DAP's complaint that Taib has a finger in every economic pie in Sarawak. And if they are not seen to be taking up the same issue against Taib they risk being obliterated at the forthcoming state elections.

SUPP is apparently raising two issues with Putrajaya.

One is the Chinese community's loss of confidence - strangely echoed by SUPP - in Taib's administration and leadership. And Rahman, 82, is reportedly grooming his daughter Norah Abdul Rahman to take over from the ailing leader.

SUPP's stand is difficult to swallow since the party has solidly stood by Taib since 1981 and even actively participated in the systematic disenfranchisement of the Dayaks, and to a lesser extent, the Malays.

As recently as just before the Sibü by-election, SUPP leaders were even hailing Taib as an extraordinary chief executive who would be hard to replace. SUPP chief George Chan, whose daughter is married to Taib's son, had nothing but gushing praise for his relative by marriage.

NONE Taib has however been bitterly complaining in private that SUPP is unfairly blaming him for the loss of Sibü. He has not been able to get over being asked to stay out of the fray in Sibü "since the people are very angry with him". Taib dutifully stayed out, forcing Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin to lead the BN campaign.

The other major SUPP complaint against Taib is that the party is not ready for the

forthcoming state elections. It cannot assure the BN that it can deliver any of the 19 seats traditionally allocated to it.

Something had to give way sooner or later on Taib.

And with the Malaysian Anti Corruption Commission (MACC) not lifting their finger even an inch on widespread allegations of Taib's abuses of power to feather his own nest, SUPP's visit to Putrajaya may seem like something is being done about Taib.

But whether they will achieve anything is highly debatable, since SUPP has been cahoots with Taib for three decades.

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