

Five names crop up as possible successors to Taib
Malaysiakini.com
August 26, 2010

Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud's recent statement hinting that he is ready to step down has sparked spirited discussions over who will succeed him.

For political analyst Jeneri Amri, it is high time that Abdul Taib, who have helmed Sarawak for 29 years, names his successor.

"As in any political party, there are factions in (PBB or Parti Pesaka Bumiputra Bersatu) as well and if Abdul Taib goes, there will be infighting, unless he names his successor.

"If he is planning to step down soon, he should allow this person to lead the campaign in the state election," said the University Malaysia Sarawak lecturer.

Experience, however, has likely taught the senior politician to avoid this path, said political analyst James Chin.

"He named people he wanted as successor before and as soon as he did, the knives came out," said the Monash University lecturer, who is also a Sarawakian.

Jeneri and Chin named five people as possible successors to Taib: Abang Johari Abang Openg, Abang Openg Abang Sapiee, Adenan Satem, Alfred Jabu Numpang and Awang Tengah Awang Ali.

In 1992, Taib named then fresh faces Abang Johari Abang Openg, Effendi Norwawi and Abang Abu Bakar Abang Mustapha as his likely successors.

NONEFast forward to more than a decade later, only Abang Johari (left) has remained as a formidable contender for the chief minister's post.

Effendi (who is also Abdul Taib's nephew) is said to have lost interest while Abang Abu Bakar's apparent "impatience" brought an end to his political career.

In fact, said Jeneri, of five people touted as possible candidates for the CM's job, Abang Johari, who is PBB deputy president II, is the strongest candidate.

Tradition of 'divide and rule'

This is because he has strong grassroots support and has good relations with the federal government as a result of his efficiency in office, he said.

Evidently, the politician managed to persuade his federal counterpart to contribute RM200 million to the ailing Sarawak Ministry of Housing and Urban Development.

The ministry was said to be almost bankrupt when Abang Johari took reigns.

The son of Sarawak's first governor, Abang Openg Abang Sapiee, is also credited with having brought billions of ringgit to Sarawak as the minister of industrial development.

Foreign investment to the state plummeted after he was moved out and made tourism minister.

However, said Chin, his aristocratic upbringing has not endeared Abang Openg to many quarters in the state.

One who returned from 'nowhere'

"He is seen as the bearer of 'ketuanan Melayu' in Sarawak, which is even more unacceptable in this part of the country where there is a greater racial mix," he said.

taib and adenan staem shaking hands 180305But both Chin and Jeneri agree that Adenan Satem (below, with Abdul Taib after his appointment), who appeared to have returned from nowhere last year to take up the new minister-rank portfolio of Special Adviser to the Chief Minister, also appeared to have a chance.

"There is a strong tradition of divide and rule in the Melanau leadership. Abdul Taib's uncle (former chief minister Abdul Rahman Ya'kub) was the one who gave the green light to DAP to enter Sarawak, to pit it against the SUPP (Sarawak United Peoples' Party).

"So it is not surprising that Adenan was brought back, to go against Abang Johari," Chin said.

Adenan and Abang Johari had clashed in the fight for the deputy president's post in 1998, which saw Abang Johari win with the help of the Dayak members, despite Taib's endorsement of Adenan.

Adenan's relationship with the federal government has remained questionable after his resignation as federal minister of environment and natural resources in 2006, supposedly to give him breathing space to focus on his constituency.

Remote-controlling from retirement

But good ties with the central government are not necessarily a factor in choosing a successor as the federal government has little say as to who gets to be Sarawak chief minister, said Chin.

"If the Sarawak BN names only one candidate as chief minister, the prime minister cannot say, 'I don't agree, find someone else'," he said.

The federal government was likely to be happy with any decision, as long as Taib ensured BN 80 percent of the Sarawak seats in Parliament, even if it meant "remote controlling" during his retirement.

alfred jabuOne person who would be a good candidate for such "puppetry", Chin added, is deputy chief minister Alfred Jabu Numpang (left).

Indeed, said Jeneri, despite being elected assemblyperson in 1974 and serving as deputy under Abdul Rahman Ya'kub, he failed to show any dynamism as a leader.

Easily controlled, Jabu would be the obvious choice to hand the reins over, as he was a person Taib could control from behind, said Chin.

Taib's interests would also be protected by another of his "blue-eyed boys", PBB senior vice president I Awang Tengah Awang Ali.

Despite holding high-ranking posts such as Minister of Planning and Resource Management II and Minister of Public Utilities, Awang Tengah was just a puppet to Taib, who called the shots in these portfolios, Chin said.

"For most Sarawakians Awang Tengah is synonymous with Taib and this is massive baggage for him if he wants to lead a state that is looking for change," agreed Jeneri.

Both Jabu and Awang Tengah would also make good "seat-warmers" for the rumoured candidate of choice, Taib's son Sulaiman, the Monash varsity lecturer said.

"Taib is a student of history, so he is likely to do what (Singapore mentor minister) Lee Kuan Yew did and install someone else to hold the place for his son," Chin added.

No political instinct

But Jeneri feels that Sulaiman's (right) involvement in politics has been more than reluctant, and that he stayed in the game only because of pressure from party members.

In fact, he said, the said heir's political instinct should be obvious to Taib, who has been in the game since the early 1960s.

Sulaiman's resignation as deputy tourism minister also indicated that he did not have much stomach for the job.

While speculations run rife, Chin believes that it is the senior politician who will have the last laugh.

"People shouldn't take his statement too seriously. He has been saying this since the 1990s.

"He still has interests in the 12 dams and aluminium smelter planned for Sarawak, for which the contracts have not been sorted out yet... so I don't think he will leave soon.

"But if he does leave, his successor could even be someone totally unknown. Taib does have a habit of surprising everyone," Chin added.

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