

Umno 'ready to move' into Sarawak
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A pro-tem committee has been set up by a group of Sarawakians to pave the way for Umno's entry into the state - the only place in the country in which the ruling party does not have a foothold.

The committee is headed by self-proclaimed 'non-politician and retired businessman' Affendi Jeman, 43, with businessman Mohamad Maulana Magiman as his deputy.

The pro-tem secretary is Hussain Zainuddin, while Abu Bakar Hassan acts as the committee's information chief.

Affendi (photo, middle) told malaysiakini today that his committee has yet to obtain official endorsement from the Umno leadership in Kuala Lumpur.

"But we have met party leaders to inform them of what we intend to do, which is to bring Umno into Sarawak," he said.

"They're very interested in what we're doing and we are keeping them informed."

Affendi said since the committee was established in September last year, they have set up 35 pro-tem branches throughout Sarawak.

"More branches are going to be set up in due course," he said, adding that the response from bumiputeras in Sarawak to the idea of Umno coming to the state had been "very good".

Huge Umno signboard

The pro-tem committee operates from the first floor of a four-storey shophouse in Matang Jaya Commercial Centre, about 4km from Kuching city.

Outside the building stands a huge signboard depicting the Umno logo and the catch-cries 'Dulu, Kini dan Selamalamanya' (Before, Now and Forever) with party flags hoisted by its sides.

"More than 2,000 people have already signed up as pro-tem members," Affendi boasted.

He felt that Umno's presence would be necessary to win back the lost support, especially among Malay and Dayak bumiputeras, that was evident in the state election last year.

Through their own research and findings, they had already ascertained the factors for the reduction in popular support for the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition, especially key partner Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) led by Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud.

"We aim to win back those people who have gone over to the opposition, especially PKR and PAS," he added. Affendi claimed that many of the pro-tem branches are headed by former PKR members.

He added that Umno leaders in Kuala Lumpur were aware of the factors for the reduced popular vote for the state BN.

No reason for PBB to exist

Meanwhile, pro-tem committee deputy leader Mohamad Maulana said that Taib had no ties with the group.

However, Mohamad said that since the committee started its campaign for Umno's entry into the state, the existing BN component parties had not made any attempt to stop them.

He scoffed at talks that the move to bring Umno into Sarawak was to put pressure on Taib to relinquish his chief minister post, which he has held for 26 years.

Affendi however added that state parties such as PBB will have no reason to exist once Umno has set its footing firmly in Sarawak.

He said that pro-tem committee members, who include academicians, want to see Umno set up in Sarawak as the party can better overcome the plight of the bumiputeras in the state.

According to Affendi, many bumiputeras had gone over to the opposition, especially PKR, in the last state election because they were 'frustrated' with the present leadership.

To a question, Affendi said he had met some Chinese in Sarawak who also wanted to see Umno come to the state.

"Look at the MCA and MIC - they have been working together with Umno since Merdeka," he said.

Affendi argued that Sarawak can do better economically under Umno.

"Despite what they said in the media, it is a fact that Sabah has developed more since Umno entered that state."

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