

Sabah takes starring role in political crisis

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The sleepy state of Sabah, better known for its rainforests and orangutans, has taken centre stage in a battle to determine who rules Malaysia.
MCPX

Far from the nation's capital and political centre, a tiny Sabah component party in the ruling 14-member coalition last week called for a no-confidence vote against Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Such an act by a party with just two lawmakers would normally be irrelevant, but with the Barisan Nasional coalition weak and facing a possible ouster by a resurgent opposition, it was political dynamite.

sapp sabah meeting 200608 07"Our window of opportunity is now and we must make a stand if Sabah does not want to be forgotten," said Sabah Progressive Party President Yong Teck Lee who dropped the bombshell which analysts say may ripple through the coalition.

"We have to act now as we will not have this bargaining position for very long," he told AFP on the weekend.

Although the no-confidence motion is unlikely to succeed when parliament resumes Monday, it highlights Abdullah's precarious position as head of the Umno which leads the coalition.

Umno has gone through the grinder after its worst ever election results earlier this year when it lost control of five states and its two-thirds majority in parliament.

Popular move

Former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim, who led the opposition to its unprecedented gains, now says he has enough support to form a government with the help of defectors - he needs just 30 more seats in parliament.

Yong has said his party will consider joining the opposition, and Anwar is also believed to be courting other coalition members, as well as Umno lawmakers, in Sabah and neighbouring Sarawak state.

Life is slow for most in Kota Kinabalu, where fishing boats with multicoloured pennants pull up to jetties and wet markets line the centre of the state capital.

Maud Bin Timoh, 48, who sells cut fruit from one of the numerous stalls along the waterfront promenade, is one of many who support Yong's move which included demands for a bigger share in Sabah's oil revenues.

"I'm happy that our politicians are creating problems in Kuala Lumpur," he said as he chopped papaya next to a garbage-filled gutter.

"We have been neglected for so long and now that we have a chance, we need to demand what is rightfully ours," he told AFP.

Many Sabahans are seriously unhappy with the way they have been treated since the state, along with Sarawak and Singapore, joined the Malaysian federation in 1963.

Singapore left Malaysia in 1965 but Sabah and Sarawak stayed on, and some now feel that was a bad decision.

"When Sabah and Sarawak joined in 1963, a 20-point clause was inserted into the merger agreement promising political autonomy, major development aid and much more," says James Chin, who has written extensively on the state.

"Unfortunately, over the last 45 years, most Sabahans feel the government has not lived up to their end of the bargain," he told AFP.

"Much of the state's natural oil reserves go to the federal government but less than five percent is returned to the people here," he said.

Issue of immigration

Many Sabahans are also worried about the large numbers of Muslim Filipinos who have settled here illegally, tipping the ethnic balance against indigenous tribes who were formerly in the majority.

In peninsular Malaysia, Muslim Malays are the dominant population, alongside large ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities.

"The issue of immigration is the mother of all problems in Sabah and we must stop all these Muslim foreigners who are coming in illegally," said Wilfred Tanggau, secretary general of the United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO) which is also part of the ruling coalition.

Development has also been slow in coming for the state which is about half the size of peninsular Malaysia, carved by massive mountain ranges and with many primitive villages and towns that remain almost inaccessible.

"It is important to shatter the government's attitude that they can ignore Sabah and continue to rule this country," state opposition leader Jeffrey Kitigan told AFP.