

PM refers to Sabah as BN's 'fixed deposit'
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Visiting Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak appears impressed that Sabah remains a valuable 'fixed deposit' for the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition.

Najib, who is on a two-day lightning maiden visit which began yesterday, quipped at a welcoming dinner function last night that the real purpose of his visit was to "check on the value of BN's fixed deposit".

"I believe its value remains high, based not only on the smiles on the faces of the leaders here but also the people," said Najib. "The voters in the state continue to give their trust and mandate to the BN."

There are some fears that the nine-party Sabah chapter of the coalition is becoming unwieldy with too many small parties.

Partyless Deputy Chief Minister Raymond Tan, formerly with the Sabah Progressive Party (Sapp), had attempted to form his own Chinese-based party but this was shot down by component party leaders. He has now joined Gerakan along with Elopura state assemblyperson Au Kam Wah.

Besides Gerakan, BN Sabah also includes four other peninsula-based parties - Umno, MCA, MIC and PPP - which outnumber local parties.

Local component member parties led by Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) include United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (Upko), Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah, all Dusun-based parties, and the Chinese-based Liberal Democratic Party.

Pasok refers to the original natives of Sabah, while Momogun is a local term for non-natives, such as Indians, Chinese and others.

Sabah an epitome of 1Malaysia

Najib hailed Sabah as a credit to his '1Malaysia, People First, Performance Now' administration which took office early last month amidst widespread dissatisfaction with outgoing PM Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Najib has yet to articulate his 1Malaysia approach in detail and attributed this in recent days to the fact that the concept is still "evolving".

"When we talk about 1Malaysia, there is no other state that fits into this concept better than Sabah," said Najib.

"There are roughly 45 ethnic and sub-ethnic groups in Sabah, making the state very colourful indeed. Here is the best example of the 1Malaysia concept.

"The people not only respect but assimilate each other's way of life to the extent that there are no barriers that separate them from each other."

He noted that it is sometimes difficult to differentiate one Sabahan from another.

Dusuns, Kadazans (urban Dusuns) and Muruts in the state Umno, for example, not only wear their traditional outfits but also the baju Melayu (traditional Malay male attire) and "so sometimes we are not sure who is who", he added.

"But it is not important which ethnic group they are from. They are all our people and this is what will make our bond stronger with each other. They are all with BN."

Najib: Do the 'walkabout' like me

Najib warned the dinner gathering that "we cannot think that the support from the people will continue forever without us playing our roles as a party member, representative and administrator".

He urged the BN leaders present to be close to the people, understand them and address the problems they are facing by adopting his 'walkabout' strategy, a term popularised in Australia.

"There are a lot of differences between listening to briefings in our office, in an air-conditioned room, compared to actually going to the ground and seeing with our eyes the problems of the people," he said.

"Under the walkabout method, leaders should go to the ground, gather information and forge a closer relationship with the people.

"People are now more educated and knowledgeable and want to see whether the government will listen to them."

As one example, he cited the fact that Sabah now has four full ministers "with important portfolios" and five deputy ministers.

"Previously, people said that ministers from Sabah were put in charge of areas like museums but no longer now.

"Rural development, commodities, science and foreign affairs are all important portfolios. Who would have ever thought that a Sabahan would be appointed the minister of foreign affairs?"

Anifah Aman, of Dusun-Pathan parentage from Umno and a younger brother of Sabah Chief Minister Musa Aman, is the foreign affairs minister.

The other full ministers are Maximus Ongkili (Science, Technology and Innovation), Bernard Dompok (Plantation Industries and Commodities) and Mohd Shafie Apdal (Rural and Regional Development).

Ongkili and Dompok are Dusuns while Shafie, also from Umno, is a Suluk. Ongkili, who is also the nephew of Deputy Chief Minister Joseph Pairin Kitingan, is from PBS while Dompok heads Upko.

A trail of broken promises

Najib pledged that his government will continue to assist the Umno-led state government "to serve its people effectively".

Casting his eye towards the next general election, he urged that the work begins now in earnest and be sustained.

His predecessor Abdullah was seen as a flip-flopping weakling, presiding over a failing economy, rising prices and rising ethnic tension and failing to stamp his authority in office even after eight years.

However, Najib did not mention the trail of broken promises left by his predecessor in Sabah, marked by the public refusal of two appointees from the state to accept their position in his cabinet.

Both Anifah and Kalabakan MP Ghapur Salleh had been offered the post of deputy minister.

Many Sabahans had viewed the offers as "adding insult to injury" after the BN swept the state in the last general election at a time when the coalition lost five states and Kuala Lumpur to the fledging opposition in Peninsular Malaysia.

Najib also did not mention several issues from the 14-point memorandum of demands which the Chinese-based Sapp had submitted to his predecessor on April 7, 2008, long before its pullout from the coalition.

Sapp withdrew from BN on Sept 17 last year citing loss of confidence in the coalition's leadership and unhappiness over a host of unresolved local grievances.

The party, which is now in opposition, has declined to join the peninsula-based Pakatan Rakyat and has pledged to go it alone as a "Third Force in Malaysian politics".

Membership in Pakatan, according to them, would be the very antithesis of their struggle for the restoration of the political autonomy of Sabah. They continue to raise the 14-point memo in talks all over the state.

The salient points include restoration of the political autonomy of the state, continuing influx of illegal immigrants, low level of Sabah representation in the federal civil service and the diplomatic service, and the special status of the High Court of Sabah and Sarawak.