

Abdullah's U-turn on gas pipeline project
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Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, noted for an administration plagued by a string of policy flip-flops and contradictions, did it again at the 23rd Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) annual congress.

He stunned the party faithful on Saturday when announcing that the on-off RM3 billion 500km Kimanis-Bintulu gas pipeline project is now on again. He offered no explanations and no apologies.

However, he pledged that "only the surplus gas from Sabah will be piped to Sarawak from the proposed gas landing point in Kimanis to the LNG plant in Bintulu".

"We cannot just scrap the project entirely," Abdullah said as PBS leaders shifted uneasily in their seats and looked at one another in disbelief.

"We will make sure that there is enough gas allocated to the needs of Sabah. We will build a power station just to make sure the state has enough gas."

Abdullah also said "the concern is that all the gas will be shipped to Sarawak".

"This is not true. It's also not true that Sabah will not get any royalty from the gas piped to Bintulu. What we take from Sabah, the state government will get the royalty as agreed before," said the premier.

Neither possibility had been raised by any political party in the state since the announcement of the proposed gas pipeline project earlier this year.

May 31, Abdullah had assured Sabah leaders in Kota Kinabalu that the controversial gas pipeline project would be scrapped as demanded by all shades of political opinion in the state.

Abdullah was then on a listening trip to Sabah and Sarawak to announce additional grants in the wake of the March 8 political tsunami which, among others, saw the two states emerge as king-makers in Parliament.

There had also been complaints that both states had only been allotted token roles in the federal administration despite contributing more than a third of the ruling Barisan Nasional's (BN) seats in Parliament. He left, in his own words, with an earful from the Sabah leg of the trip.

Sabah's main complaint

The major complaint in Sabah is that the state has little to show despite its huge oil and gas reserves vis-à-vis Sarawak and Terengganu.

Sabah has 2.2 billion barrels of known oil reserves out of 5.4 billion barrels and 11.6 tscf gas reserves out of 89 tscf.

However, there's only a methanol plant in Labuan when several states that do not produce oil - Pahang; Johor, Kedah and Malacca - have oil and gas infrastructure, industries and activities.

On Oct 10, Upko leader Bernard Giluk Dompok had alleged in his policy speech at his party's 12th triennial general meeting - which Abdullah skipped - that "Petronas and its subsidiaries (have) stepped up the implementation of its plan (the pipeline project), disregarding completely the announcement by the prime minister".

"Who can blame anyone for losing confidence in the prime minister and the government when government companies themselves are consigning to the dustbin, the government's decision announced by the chief executive of the country," said Dompok.

"I repeat today what I have told my cabinet colleagues. Petronas is countermanding the prime minister."

Dompok also took the federal government to task for not having intervened in the matter.

"Firstly, this is an announcement by the prime minister on behalf of the government. If (his) words cannot be relied upon, all the other decisions and promises by the prime minister in respect of Sabah mean nothing at all.

"It strikes deep into the integrity and credibility of the government and the BN as a whole. We have a duty in this party to monitor the mandate and trust given by the electorate."

PBS highlights concerns

In his speech, Abdullah also advised PBS to remain loyal to the BN, pledged that the federal government would flush out and repatriate the estimated 100,000-150,000 illegals in Sabah and confessed he "hated goodbyes".

PBS chief Joseph Pairin Kitingan did not touch on the Kimanis-Bintulu gas pipeline in his welcome address at the two-day party meet.

Instead, he thanked the prime minister profusely for supporting the re-admission of his party into the BN amidst a standing ovation.

He called on the federal government "to walk the talk when it came to the issue of religious freedom", noted that the natives in the state are still very backward in all spheres, and proposed that the federal constitution be amended to incorporate an Anti-Hop law.

Pairin did not say how the BN, without a two-third parliamentary majority, will get the opposition's support to amend the constitution.

The BN has 139 of the 222 seats in Parliament. Its Pensiangan seat in Sabah was recently declared vacant by an Election Court for electoral fraud.

Lost surveyors found by Penans

Meanwhile, two surveyors involved in the gas pipeline project in the dense jungles of Borneo

have been rescued by tribesmen after getting lost for five days.

The two surveyors went missing on Tuesday in northern Sarawak while carrying out demarcation work for the proposed pipeline.

The Penan tribesmen, who live a semi-nomadic lifestyle, found Ismail Salleh, 31, and Rano Sani, 26, while hunting in the jungle on Saturday.

The surveyors were part of a 50-strong team who were drawing up a land route to lay a 500-kilometre gas pipeline from Kimanis near Kota Kinabalu in Sabah to oil rich Bintulu in Sarawak.

"How they got lost is still a puzzle. We will interview them soon, but the good news is that they are not hurt," local police chief Jonathan Jalin was quoted as saying by the Sunday Star newspaper.

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