

Sabah BN meet - perhaps too little, too late
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ANALYSIS KOTA KINABALU – Sabah BN is scheduled to meet Tuesday (Aug 24) in Kota Kinabalu after months of a tug-of-war in the local media between the local chapter of Umno on one side and almost all the other component parties publicly arranged against it on various issues.

The last BN meet, pointed out coalition secretary Abdul Rahman Dahlan, was in March this year. Apparently, this was after going for four years without any meeting.

Patently, the inability of Sabah BN to meet regularly has left component parties with no other avenue except the local media to air their grievances. This has invariably resulted in routine reminders from Sabah Umno leaders, including Rahman himself, that component parties should use proper channels to air their views. But it has not been spelt out so far what these proper channels are in the absence of regular Sabah BN meets.

Obviously, if the Sabah BN meets today as scheduled, the first order of business would be to agree to meet regularly, even if to agree to disagree. This is expected to discourage the tendency among component parties to wash their dirty linen in public. But isn't the Sabah BN meet today a case of too little, too late?

Sabah BN has clearly crossed the Rubicon after coming under relentless pressure from opposition parties since the political tsunami of 8 March, 2008 when five states in Peninsular Malaysia fell to the Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

Some thing has to give way between Sabah Umno on the one hand and the other component parties but this is unlikely to happen anytime soon. The ruling party cannot insist on having its cake and eating it too as the others watch in dismay and growing anger.

The mother of all issues is the oft-cited BN spirit of consensus-and-compromise and power-sharing. This has been openly questioned by the local parties in the coalition, without exception, with some unfortunate results.

Many Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leaders, for example, have been axed from their government positions. This has also something to do with the fact that former LDP president Chong Kah Kiat has turned his aborted Mazu – Goddess of the Sea – statue project in Kudat into a political hot potato.

LDP has even called on the federal leadership several times to change the present state leadership or risk the wrath of the people in the coming polls.

LDP's boldness has come with a price. Sabah Umno wants back the Merotai and Tanjung Kapor state seats contested by the party on the grounds that they were on "loan" from Umno.

Not satisfied with pressing its claim to LDP state seats through Kalabakan MP Ghapur Salleh, various other Sabah Umno leaders have asked so far for the "return" of Putatan parliamentary seats from the United PasokMomogun KadazanDusunMurut Organisation (Upko) and the Kota Kinabalu parliamentary seat from the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS).

Sabah Umno has also indicated that it wants to contest the Sepanggar parliamentary seat

held by the Sabah Progressive Party (Sapp), no longer a member of the coalition since late 2008.

Sabah BN component party leaders and members outside Umno are not amused by these demands. They point out that they run counter to the pledge given by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad that Sabah Umno will not contest more than half the parliamentary and state seats at stake. This is in line with the coalition's power-sharing principle.

There were murmurs of discontent when Sabah Umno crossed the half-way mark in 2008 and won 32 of the 60 state seats at stake. The component parties would have been more comfortable with 29 state seats for Sabah Umno and no more. However, the talk within Sabah Umno circles is the party would only feel comfortable with at least 36 state seats, if not more.

Likewise, the thinking is that Sabah Umno should not contest more than 12 parliamentary seats out of the combined 26 in Sabah and Labuan. At present it holds 13 of the 25 parliamentary seats in Sabah and the Labuan seat and has given every indication that it wants to contest in even more seats, leaving a measly number for the others to share among them. This is a sure recipe for disaster since it reduces the other parties to irrelevance, a complaint leveled by the Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRBS).

At this stage, it would not be out of place to ask whether there's a need for the Sabah BN to exist at all given the lack of balance in power and strength among the various component parties.

Sabah BN can only move forward in unison to face the opposition alliance if the power-sharing issue is settled on the basis of the traditional formula that no component party should have more than 50 per cent of the seats, whether parliamentary or state.

Luckily for the Sabah BN, the opposition alliance in the state is still to get its act together. So, it appears that the ruling coalition can still win the next General Election, albeit by default with a difference. There will be more opposition members in the next state assembly and from Sabah in the next Parliament.

Then, there are the myriad of other issues in the state which have so far eluded solution.

The most important of these is the issue of the appointment of the Chief Minister. Sabah Umno veteran Karim Ghani, a founding leader of the local chapter, makes no secret of his displeasure that the party's national leaders in Kuala Lumpur have failed to allow it to elect their own leader. This was a promise first made by Mahathir but never carried out. At present, the Sabah Umno leader is appointed Kuala Lumpur, an act running contrary to the state constitution on the appointment of the Chief Minister.

The State Constitution holds that the Chief Minister must be appointed by the Governor from among the state assemblyperson after considering their individual positions. Umno Malaysia can still appoint the Sabah Umno leader if it wants but the Governor should have the sole right to appoint any state assemblyperson whom he deems fit to be Chief Minister.

The opposition has made much of the issue of the appointment of the Chief Minister. They point out that not only does the present practice infringe the State Constitution but it is also in violation of its autonomy. Sabah BN has no answers to these oft-repeated charges by the opposition alliance.

Sabah BN component parties also need to get their politics and their relationships right to tackle various other problems besetting the state. There is no end of issues testing the mettle of the ruling coalition in the run-up to 2013 when the next General Election is due.

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