

Could Taib's cousin Norah be the next Chief Minister?

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COMMENT If the rumours turn out to be true, the next Sarawak Chief Minister could be a woman.

There is intense speculation that Abdul Taib Mahmud has made up his mind to pick as his successor Tanjong Manis MP Norah Abdul Rahman, his cousin and the daughter of Taib's predecessor Tun Abdul Rahman Yakub. If so, Norah would be both Sarawak's and Malaysia's first woman Chief Minister.

Earlier this month, Taib said he was ready to call it a day if the people no longer wanted him. His statement sparked a chain of speculation as to who would succeed him. Among names that were touted were Abang Johari Abang Openg, Abang Openg Abang Sapiee, Adenan Satem, Alfred Jabu Numpang and Awang Tengah Awang Ali.

Among the five, the front-liner is seen to be Abang Johari, the son of Sarawak's first governor Abang Openg Abang Sapiee. He is also deputy president II of Taib's Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu or PBB.

But there are others who believe Taib will choose Norah, as part of a pact made with his uncle Abdul Rahman to ensure that power remains within their family and the Melanau community. Norah is also seen as a seat-warmer for Taib's son Sulaiman, the Kota Samarahan MP and former deputy Tourism minister who has a notorious reputation for chasing after the high-life.

"There is much talk in Kuching that Tun Rahman's daughter Norah is to be the next Chief Minister of Sarawak – to guard the 'rear butt' of Taib against corruption charges and to ensure the continuity of his business empire when he steps down," prominent Dayak rights activist Dr John Brian Anthony wrote in his blog.

If the speculation is right, then Norah would have to stand for a state seat in the 10th Sarawak elections which were last held in May 2006. Since the state assembly was convened two months later, this means Taib can officially delay polls till July 2011.

At the moment, most pundits believe the Sarawak elections will be held in November 2010,

Meanwhile, PKR chief of Sarawak Baru Bian told Malaysia Chronicle that Taib plans to stay on despite offering to relinquish his position.,

"Every other day, one of his colleagues comes out in the local media calling for him to stay. One day, it is James Maseng, another it is Alfred Jabu and so on. One of them even said there should be a Taib "clone" because he is irreplaceable," said Baru.

"But the fact is Taib is not ready to leave yet. How can he when there is so much evidence piling against him for corruption and what-not, how would he dare to step down? On this basis, he won't call for elections until all the bad news about him cools down. Even if he is gung-ho, Kuala Lumpur may object, although of course he may not listen to them."

The flamboyant white-haired Taib is known for his fabulous wealth. His huge trademark emerald ring and cream-colored Rolls Royce were once the symbols of the alleged corruption his critics used to attack him for.

But these are nothing compared to the latest revelations from the Sarawak Report, an online magazine dedicated to exposing his misdeeds. Intricate details have been uncovered about his sprawling overseas business connections and where he has invested his wealth. Several large Sarawakian firms have also been pinpointed for gifting him with special deals such as a US\$7mil (RM23mil) mansion for only US\$1 (RM3.20).

Pictures of his palatial homes around the world, furnished even more luxuriously than many Royal households, have been posted on the website and are gawked at by Sarawakians and also Malaysians in the rest of the country.

For these reasons, Prime Minister Najib Razak may be keen for the 74-year old Taib to step. So far, despite the mounting evidence and long string of complaints lodged with the police and Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, the federal government has refused to investigate or take action against Taib.

“There is very little that Kuala Lumpur can do or dare to do against Taib. He has been Chief Minister for 29 years, so you can imagine how powerful he is. The most that Najib can try is to broker some sort of deal for Taib to step down but it may not satisfy the old man. Unless someone very close to him takes his place and protects him from any witch-hunt, he won't take the chance,” Baru said.

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