

The buzz - Is Taib just testing the waters?

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KUALA LUMPUR – When Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud recently said that he is prepared to step down if the people do not want him anymore, the political scene in Sarawak went abuzz with talk that he is preparing to call it a day.

Many political watchers, however, feel that his remark was merely a cautionary statement that was well-calculated to “test the waters”.

Of late, the 74-year-old Taib, who is the state’s longest-serving chief minister (29 years since March 26, 1981), has been the target of rumours of his alleged abundance of wealth.

“He will not step down. He just wants to know who is complaining. His remark is a calculated statement to find out who are against him,” says a political analyst in the University of Monash, James Chin.

Chin believes that Taib’s latest remark may have to do with rumours that the Sarawak United People’s Party (SUPP), a component party in Sarawak’s Barisan Nasional (BN), wants him to step down as some sections of the local community seem to have lost confidence in him.

There is talk that SUPP may have lobbied the federal leadership to step in to deal with Taib, a move similar to the one in the 1980s when it wanted Taib’s uncle, Tan Sri (now Tun) Abdul Rahman Yaa’kub, to step down as chief minister or it would quit the BN.

Rahman then fought his rivals by organising mass rallies in Sarawak but to no avail and finally stepped down — but not before he demanded that his nephew, Taib, be appointed as his successor.

Chin says Taib’s remark was not something new and the only immediate reaction from such a remark was that various parties, associations and non-governmental organisations may make calls for him to stay on.

The most likely scenario is that his own party, Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), will pass a resolution of support and Taib will continue to lead BN Sarawak in the next state election, he says.

Another political analyst, Dr Sivamurugan Pandian, believes that Taib wants to test to what extent the federal leadership would support him following rumours of him wanting to step down.

“He might not be serious in wanting to leave as he wants to stay. What he is doing now is to see if the federal leadership wants to back him up or not. If the federal leadership does not want to back him, then he (Taib) would look at what options there are open to him. Most probably, he would look at a win-win situation as an exit strategy,” he says.

However, Dr Sivamurugan says it would be a difficult situation for the federal leadership to deal with as it needs a smooth transition plan, otherwise it would lead to internal bickering that may weaken PBB, the backbone of the state’s BN leadership.

“It’s a Catch-22 situation. You have got to remember, Taib is an institution in Sarawak and

is known to be a strong leader who has managed to keep religion on the back-burner in the overwhelmingly non-Muslim majority Sarawak," he said.

Therefore, Dr Sivamurugan says, anybody replacing him must be seen as strong and capable who can balance the needs of the various ethnic groups in Sarawak, which has more than 40 sub-ethnic groups, each with its own distinct language, culture and lifestyle.

It is no wonder that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said last Friday that he would have to a "heart-to-heart" discussion with Taib on the future of the state leadership.

This is understandable as PBB has been the pillar of strength for BN in Sarawak and it is only fair to have a discussion first before any decision is made.

At the state level, there are already calls for him to stay on as chief minister, with the first, as expected, coming from PBB's youth wing followed by two of the state's rural-based BN component parties, Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) and Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS).

Only SUPP has not made its stand known openly on Taib's latest remark.

SPDP president Datuk Seri William Mawan Ikom said the state still needed him as "he is the man, he is the brain and how can anybody talk about him resigning?"

"He a little bit tired sometimes, he should have a little bit of rest, but he is the man (for the state). What we are facing (and) what the state is embarking on, we really need him because he is the driving force and he puts us on the world map. No, he is not resigning and I for one will make sure that he stays," said Mawan, as quoted in a local newspaper report.

PRS president Datuk Seri Dr James Jemut Masing also said that the party would support Taib for as long as he was wanted to lead the state.

"In the recent BN retreat in Mulu, each of us (the state BN components) made our stand as regards the CM (Taib) to lead the BN in the next election. And PRS has not changed its stand, as long as the CM wants to lead, we will be behind him," said Masing, who is Sarawak's Land Development Minister.

However, a political analyst at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas), Dr Jeniri Amir, points out that it is only natural for other leaders in the state to openly declare they need him as "everyone knows Taib is politically too powerful and nobody dares to ask him to step down as their political future depends on him".

Dr Jeniri feels that Najib's "heart-to-heart" talk with Taib should be used as an avenue to tell the chief minister about the political situation on the ground and that Taib should also listen to the "voice of reason" from Sarawak.

He believes that Taib's remark on wanting to step down this time around was genuine as he has realised the change in the political landscape.

"The onus is on him, not the prime minister or his party," he says. — Bernama

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