

**Ex-Sarawak strongman Salleh set to join the fray**  
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Salleh Jafaruddin speaks to Malaysiakini at his home in Petaling Jaya.

salleh-sarawak There were speculations that you want to return to active politics in Sarawak. Is this true?

I'm not sure who started the speculations. That's interesting considering that I have been away from the political scene for some 20 years.

But I must say it's something worth considering. I'm very free now. I'm also in the best of health. Many of my friends have been encouraging me to come back to help and assist younger leaders in Sarawak.

[Former president Pervez] Musharraf also plans to return and lead Pakistan. Back home, even Umno has asked Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah to stand as a candidate in Galas.

If one feels that he is still able to contribute his services to the state and country, then he must be a responsible citizen. Return and serve if your services are still needed.

You are now 67. At that age, why do you still want to return to active politics?

Age is not an issue if there is still the capacity to serve.

There is no law in this country or anywhere in the world prohibiting citizens to return to active politics even after having reached retirement age.

Tok Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat is already 81, Ku Li is approaching 74. Taib Mahmud is 74. Dr Mahathir served until 78. And now at 85, he is still active. Anyone still mentally alert, qualified and experienced can still contribute if they are concerned with the future of the country.

I also wish to stress that political leaders must possess wisdom. Wisdom is acquired through experience, and wisdom, according to Prophet Daud, is the life of the soul.

Human beings who have conscience have souls. A man without a soul is dead. The dead man is only remembered through the inscription of his name on his tombstone. In other words, a man with a conscience is still alive. When there is life, irrespective of whether you are young or old, evoking changes then become possible.

Do you think you still have the political support in Sarawak?

Every aspiring politician, whether they're young or old, will have individual support. For a politician to claim that he has 100 percent support is nothing but bragging.

Even Taib Mahmud, who has been the chief minister for 30 years, cannot claim he has absolute support from the people or even from his colleagues in the government.

You had been in PBB and part of the Barisan Nasional government previously. Then you

were also in the opposing camp against the Taib administration for some time. Where is your political loyalty now?

Since the 1987 Ming Court affair, I have not switched my political loyalty to my mentor, Abdul Rahman Yakub (former Sarawak CM and governor). Rahman lost in his bid to return that year but I won in the predominantly Iban/Chinese/Kedayan area in Subis.

I believe my supporters, at least 30 percent, are still with me today because of my personal loyalty to my mentor. Now that Rahman (left) has reconciled with the CM, I believe my supporters can go both ways.

There could be more than before because of the reconciliation or it could also be reduced because of opposition to the current leadership. Only an election can determine actual political support.

Overall, I believe that I have been consistent on this issue of political loyalty. I have not wavered. But loyalty must also include doing what is right for the people, state and nation. One must not be blindly loyal. Possibly, this is why I still have my support on the ground. People know what I stood for previously.mingcourt

The Sarawak BN has been in power for such a long time. Some say that for the coming state election, the coalition will be at its most vulnerable. What do you think?

Sarawak Barisan Nasional is an aging political institution. Many of the leaders have been there for a very long time, perhaps longer than they should.

At the top, its wealthy and powerful chief is frail, sickly and feeble. But his appetite for work does not seem to show any sign of slowing down. Although he has helmed the state much longer than any other political leader in the country, there seems to be no apparent sign of his immediate retirement.

taibTaib Mahmud has the experience, wealth and political cunningness even to take the bull by the horn. With absolute support of 29 Barisan MPs out of 31 (two are with the opposition DAP) without which the federal government will fall, he can even hold the prime minister to ransom.

I think it's important for the state BN to undertake some drastic reforms. People are demanding it and the government has to listen. A government which does not listen to the people will eventually collapse.

How would you describe your relationship with the CM?

Blood is thicker than water. I can say that we are still close. I attended the funeral and prayers during Laila's (Taib's late wife) funeral. I even carried Laila's hearse. Politically, we may disagree on certain issues but that is beside the point.

Although I do not directly communicate in person with the CM, I had written a series of letters to the leadership – the latest just three months ago to indicate my concerns over Sarawak affairs.

When was the last time you discuss politics with him?

I discussed politics with him before 1987 for seven hours. When I chose to go with Rahman

Yakub in the revolt against Taib, it was actually against the advice of Dr Mahathir. But I didn't want to be ungrateful to someone who made me what I am today.

My desire to be loyal to someone rather than a political institution may be considered a mistake which could have caused my political downfall. However, personal loyalty cannot be bought but institutional loyalty can change. If the institution demands a change, then we should change.

Therefore, whether we are old or young, the need to motivate and reactivate the blending of the old and new ideas must necessarily be orientated towards the well-being of the hope and future of the country.

It is the untapped experience which one may have that can contribute to the greatness of the cause that we believe. Any cause which is about doing good for the people and doing the right thing for the country is worth getting involved in.

Have the opposition parties approach you?

As a former opposition member in the Sarawak State Assembly and knowing that I have not been jumping here and there, naturally opposition parties like PKR, PCM (Parti Cinta Malaysia) including the newly proposed Parti Economy Sarawak have informally extended their invitation to get me politically involved with them.

But considering that I had met Najib Abdul Razak three days before he assumed office as prime minister, I vividly remember his advice to me not to go with the opposition. This advice was strengthened by my belief that my membership with PBB is still there after I was given the membership card before the Miri PBB convention more than two years ago.

Because of that, we were requested to assist in the Batang Ai by-election together with the then SNAP deputy president Ting Ling Kiew. For that effort, the PM promised us to reinstate SNAP, which he had fulfilled and delivered.

Most of the oppositionists like Anwar Ibrahim, Zaid Ibrahim, Wan Zainal, Baru Bian, Bujang Ulis and others are all my friends. I would not cut off personal friendship because of political consideration.

Remember the saying – 'No permanent enemy nor permanent friend in politics'. What is permanent is only interest – interest to improve oneself, family, the citizens and the state and nation.

After being in the thick of politics and then leaving it all for so many years, have your political convictions change in any way?

I don't think so but being aware that political evolution is an on-going process, we do need to re-adjust as much as possible whenever and wherever necessary.

I always remember the Latin inscription at the entrance at the Istana in Kuching – Dum Spiro Spero. It means "While I Breathe, I Hope...".

I should also add that where there is hope, there is a future. And the future of the state and nation must be shaped by sincere and pure convictions of our leaders. This is paramount.

Finally, what is your brand of politics now?

I believe my record stands that I have never uttered anything that would create ill will and remorse against the leadership. I disagree on the question of principles. In politics, we agree to disagree – nothing personal. In politics, we must be able to forgive and forget, because to forgive is divine.

Look at Nelson Mandela – he was incarcerated for 27 years but after he assumed the leadership of South Africa, he never took revenge on his political enemies. That is the hallmark of a statesman. Possibly, Mandela is the only living political saint.

If all political leaders can emulate Mandela, just imagine the goodness that will exude around the world. Now, why can't we find a Mandela in Malaysia?

I think it is crucial to bring others who have fallen by the wayside back. Many are still talented and possess the conviction to do good for the country.

My politics is not politics of vengeance. It's the politics of change – to change our political attitude and create a new, vibrant political culture in order to give hope to our future generations.

Let me add: I will fight and go the extra mile for something I strongly believe in. If the coming state election is about giving hope for the future, then count me in. – Malaysiakini

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