

**Taib Mapping Out Route For Leadership Change**  
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KUCHING -- For the first time after a long while, Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud has stated his tentative timetable on him passing on the baton to the new leadership.

It looks like he may do so in two-and-a-half years from now after announcing yesterday that he would lead the Sarawak Barisan Nasional (BN) into the 10th state election and defend his Balingian state seat.

Taib first expressed his intention to step down in 2006 but that did not work out and that he had to postpone it.

He did not fully explain the reason then but keen political watchers noticed that Taib had somewhat indicated it in his speech at the launching of the Senada Sejiwa programme in Serian yesterday.

Taib said that he would continue to lead the state to ensure "new blood" could come up, and make his exit when he was satisfied that the new leadership could work well together.

He did not name any potential successor.

"I think he wants to ensure that his successor and the people around the chosen one wouldn't go against one another; that they can work as a team and safeguard the BN's position in the state," said a keen political watcher.

Meanwhile, political analyst Dr Sivamurugan Pandian believed that Taib would relinquish his position in the next one or two years.

If he was to step down now, it might trigger be a power struggle within the Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), the bastion of the ruling coalition in the state.

"He has to groom someone to take over. He might have already groomed the person but for reasons best known to him, he has postponed (the succession)," he said.

From a political strategy perspective, Dr Sivamurugan said it would not be wise for Taib to step down before the election or immediately after, because this would put the spotlight on who would be the next chief minister, instead of on winning and retaining power in the election.

"The issue is more complex. It's not about who should be the chief minister. In Sarawak, it's more about who would succeed him as PBB president, and that is why it can't be done overnight," he added.

It was not surprising therefore for the transition to take a longer period, probably until the middle of the next term to allow the potential successor to come up from the party's senior ranks.

Taib, 75, who said that he was seriously looking for leaders to lead the party would dissolve the state assembly on Monday, five days short of his 30 years in office as the chief minister.

Taib has been PBB president and chief minister since March 26, 1981, a period of about 29 years.

Previously, Taib mentioned three potential successors -- Adenan Satem, Abang Johari Tun Abang Haji Openg and Effendi Norwawi.

But over time, things changed.

The spotlight is now on the current crop of senior leaders -- Deputy President I Alfred Jabu, Deputy President II Amar Abang Johari Tun Openg and Senior Vice-President Awang Tengah Ali Hassan.

Party insiders pointed out that since Taib had often mentioned that he and Jabu were "old enough", the focus now would be on Abang Johari and Awang Tengah.

They said that six months ago at a party meeting, Taib expressed his wish to see both Abang Johari and Awang Tengah working together.

"I think Taib needs more time as he wants these two to show that they can work as a team prior to one of them being picked as the successor, allowing a smooth leadership transition," said one of the insiders.

In PBB's history, no one has ever challenged the party's president.

In 1998, Adenan and Abang Johari Tun Openg were up against each other for the deputy president's post, the one reserved for the Malay/Melanau community.

Abang Johari triumphed following a strong backing from the Dayak members despite the fact that Adenan was strongly backed by Taib at that time.

Adenan, the vanquished, was later appointed by Taib as the party's senior vice-president.

Seven years later, Adenan mounted another challenge on Abang Johari, but the delegates' conference was postponed when it was reported that some of Adenan's supporters were allegedly found to have duplicate branches in some 40 constituencies.

The same insider said that Taib, being a seasoned politician, was known to have a dislike on whoever who tried to put pressure on him to step down to effect changes in the state's leadership.

He would eventually step down but he wanted to do it on his own terms, he said. "You can't try to force him as he knows how to turn the tables on you, as he had done in the past. Some political hopefuls tried to force him out but in the end, they ended up in political oblivion."

(Bernama)

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