

COMMENT: Will Dayak problems help the Opposition?

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Jan 15: The succession within Sarawak's leadership and the rivalry in the Dayak community will provide the drama in the upcoming state election. ABDUL RAZAK AHMAD looks at the factors that shape the State's politics.

THE last state election in Sarawak was on Nov 27, 2001 and the current State Government's term only expires in November. But the State is already abuzz with speculation about a possible snap election.

"Some people are guessing that it's going to be in March while others are banking on June or September," said State DAP chairman Richard Wong Ho Leng.

"I'm not interested in when it's going to be held. It's forthcoming and we have to be ready even if it is held tomorrow."

There are continuing indications that the polls may be held sooner rather than later.

The State Barisan Nasional has finalised the ruling coalition's election manifesto, while the Election Commission is busy making logistical preparations.

Some may wonder what the fuss is all about, because its outcome is a near certainty.

"The BN will remain in power in Sarawak and the Opposition will make few inroads into state politics," said BN component Parti Rakyat Sarawak president Datuk Seri Dr James Masing. And he isn't boasting.

The BN is dominant in Sarawak. The DAP is the only Opposition party in the State Assembly. It has just one member in the 62-seat assembly.

It will be a no-brainer that the State BN will most likely romp home to a landslide victory. But the coming polls is special for two reasons.

The first is a possible succession in the State leadership. The second is the outcome of in-fighting in the majority Dayak community.

Both factors carry significant long-term implications, not only for the State but for the Federal BN as well.

After all, Sarawak BN's consistent ability to deliver over 90 per cent of its 28 Parliament seats — recently increased to 31 out of a total of 221 nationwide — is of great importance to the ruling coalition.

These factors will make the state election the most closely watched in recent times.

But for the uninitiated, the unique and complex forces that shape the State make Sarawak politics difficult to understand.

A good starting point lies in its diverse ethnic tapestry. Sarawak has the richest ethnic make-up of all the States in Malaysia, which also makes it the most complex to govern.

The main ethnic group in Sarawak is the Iban, who make up slightly less than one-third of the State's population of 2.4 million.

They are followed by the Chinese (26 per cent), Malays (21 per cent), Bidayuh (five per cent) and the Melanau (seven per cent).

The remainder are mostly the Orang Ulu, a term popularly used to refer to smaller indigenous communities such as the Lun Bawang, Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit and Penan.

Politically, the people of Sarawak are grouped under three broad categories: Muslim Malays and Melanau, Chinese, and Dayak which is a term used collectively to refer to the Iban, Bidayuh and Orang Ulu.

The secret of the BN's uninterrupted rule in Sarawak is its ability to forge a successful coalition of partners to represent the diverse ethnic, political and religious interests in the State.

The primary component of the Sarawak BN is Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB). It was set up in 1973 following the merger of the Dayak-based Parti Pesaka and the Melanau/Malay-based Parti Bumiputera. Led by Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, PBB is the backbone of the State BN coalition.

The second component is the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP). Established in 1959, SUPP is Sarawak's oldest political party.

Although multi-ethnic, the SUPP traces its roots back to Chinese social and commercial organisations in the State.

The party is led by Deputy Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr George Chan. (Sarawak has two deputy chief ministers. The second is PBB deputy president Tan Sri Alfred Jabu.)

The PBB and SUPP are the most politically stable of the four State BN component parties. The big question mark in the upcoming polls concerns the remaining two components — the Dayak-based Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) and the Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS).

Both the SPDP and PRS are relative newcomers to the BN coalition.

They replace two previous Dayak-based BN components which have been deregistered: the Sarawak National Party (SNAP) and Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS).

The SPDP is an offshoot of SNAP and is led by former SNAP strongman Datuk William Mawan. The PRS came up in PBDS' place and is led by Masing, a former PBDS secretary-general.

There is a long and complicated history of intra-party and inter-party political rivalries in SNAP and PBDS. Masing acknowledges that the going has not been smooth in the past several years. But he notes that there is real cause for optimism.

"Building unity and togetherness among our two new Dayak-based parties needs time and greater understanding and trust," said Masing.

"But the entry of both our parties into the State BN has enhanced and strengthened our voice in the rural-based constituencies."

Some observers remain doubtful.

"Both parties are emblematic of how splintered the Dayak community is politically," notes a Kuching-based political observer.

"Their relative electoral popularity vis-a-vis each other will provide clues as to who can claim pre-eminence and thus avoid the sorry fates of PBDS and SNAP."

"There is still some behind-the-scenes rivalry between them, which some predict could even lead to the fielding of proxy independents in the other party's constituencies."

These potential problems, if left unchecked, could erode the BN's performance in future elections and benefit some of the Opposition parties, which is why the ability of both parties to galvanise the community in the coming polls will be closely watched.

The State Opposition, meanwhile, comprises the peninsula-based DAP, Parti Keadilan Rakyat and Pas, as well as local parties, including the State Reform Party (Star), the Malaysian Dayak Congress (MDC), which is still awaiting approval from the Registrar of Societies, and SNAP, which has been granted permission to use its name in the coming polls pending a hearing of its appeal against deregistration by the High Court.

Few expect the Opposition to make a significant impact. But with only one state assemblyman and one parliamentarian, there can be no other direction for the Opposition to go but up.

"We believe the people want a stronger voice in the Opposition because our voice is now limited," said State Keadilan chief Wan Zainal Abidin Wan Senusi. "We don't want the State Government to be so strong that they end up being able to do as they please."

That the BN coalition's rule in Sarawak has been uninterrupted despite the challenges is widely credited to Taib, 68, who has served as Chief Minister for close to 25 years.

With him lies the main significance of the coming polls. Many expect a clearer picture on his eventual successor to emerge after the election.

"The succession of the State leadership and the legacy of Taib, who has built up an unassailable position with a hugely successful political machine, may be the main if unspoken issue in the coming election," noted the political observer.

"With PBB's dominance affirmed, Taib may feel that his legacy is assured and will likely plan hand over the reins to his successor in the mid-term of the next election cycle."

Taib has yet to formally announce his successor or provide a time frame.

But many expect his eventual successor to be one among three possible leaders — PBB senior vice-president and Federal Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Datuk Seri Adenan Satem; Datuk Seri Abang Johari Tun Openg, who is the other party deputy president aside from Alfred Jabu; and vice-president Datuk Seri Effendi Norwawi.

"There is much talk that this could perhaps be the last election for Taib before he hands over the post to his successor, who is most probably Adenan," said Wong.

All indications point to a smooth succession, whenever it happens. This is critical in a State as delicately balanced as Sarawak. With the PBB the dominant leader in the State BN, any problems with the succession could effect on the overall stability of the coalition and jeopardise its future.

"We expect the succession of the state leadership to be smooth, with the Chief Minister watching closely and supervising the whole process," said Masing.

"Our confidence in a smooth eventual succession is a source of comfort for all component parties."

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