

Taib Soldiers On

Veteran Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud shows no signs of stepping down, as indicated by his remarks at the recently concluded Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu assembly in Miri. What he has, however, is a succession plan, in which three players have emerged as frontrunners for the most coveted position in the resource-rich state. ■ By S C Chan

Long-serving Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud going to call it a day soon? Not likely, if his comments at his party's recent annual assembly are anything to go by.

Taib, 71, who has been Chief Minister of resource-rich Sarawak since 1981, raised eyebrows with his public comments at the recent Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) meeting in Miri. Although this disappointed his critics and political opponents, the veteran politician did manage to placate them by talking about his succession plan.

'Yes, the succession plan is already in place,' Taib told reporters after the closed-door party meeting, when two of the three party leaders he had earlier named as his possible successors stepped down from their party posts.

Former Federal Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Datuk Adenan Satem, 64, and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Mohd Effendi Norwawi, 59, told Taib that they did not want to continue as PBB Senior Vice-President and Vice-President respectively.

Taib acquiesced to their requests and brought in state Second Minister of Planning and Resource Management and Party Treasurer Datuk Awang Tengah Ali Hassan to replace Adenan and Kelaka State Assemblyman Abdul



Taib: Not stepping down just as yet



Effendi: Chief Minister-in-waiting?

Wahab Aziz to replace Effendi.

The third person Taib has named as his potential successor is Datuk Seri Abang Johari Tun Openg, son of Sarawak's first post-independence Governor, the late Tun Abang Haji Openg, and state Housing Minister. He remains as PBB's Deputy President (Bumiputera wing).

The PBB chief dropped a bombshell by announcing that it would not be the party's highest decision-making body — the Supreme Council — that would decide on his successor, but a caucus of the party's

elected representatives comprising members of parliament, state assemblymen and senators.

In effect, what Taib told his party colleagues is that the positions they hold in the Supreme Council would not count when it comes to deciding on his successor. He (Taib) will make the recommendations, but the final decision would rest with the so-called parliamentary caucus.

The party's constitution, amended in 2002, provides for the setting up of the caucus, and whoever commands its



Awang Tengah: The dark horse in the CM race

Member of Parliament, followed by his appointment as a Federal Minister.

When it appeared that he had given up active politics in 1999 by not re-contesting the Kuala Rajang parliamentary seat, he returned in 2004 as a senator. Subsequently, he was appointed to his present position as Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in charge of the Economic Planning Unit (EPU), with the specific responsibility of overseeing the implementation of the Ninth Malaysia Plan.

Effendi enjoys a close working relationship with Federal leaders, and this gives him the advantage over any aspirant for the No 1 post in the state. His apparent lack of grass-root support can be seen as a disadvantage, but then again, when Taib himself became a *wakil rakyat* for the first time and moved to Kuala Lumpur, he too was said to enjoy little grass-root contact.

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confidence would not only go on to become the nominated candidate for the Chief Minister's post, but also take over as party leader. Constitutionally, this appears to go against the norm because it appears to be usurping the powers of the party's highest-decision making body.

Politically, however, it appears to be the right thing to do because the caucus comprises members elected by the people, who, in turn, will choose one among them to be their leader. Further, such a party decision cannot be questioned in a court of law, after the Societies Act was amended, following the Umno crisis, with the inclusion of Article 18C, which ties the hands of the court to rule against a party decision.

Although Taib also said he had not decided on anyone at that stage as his likely successor, political observers and many party members believe that his first choice is Effendi, whose loyalty to Taib has been described by an Effendi supporter as 'unquestionable'.

Back in Sarawak in the 1980s, when Effendi was Chairman of the Sarawak Economic Development Corporation (SEDC), he proved his usefulness to Taib by helping to create what has now become the Taib family-controlled listed entity Cahya Mata Sarawak Bhd. After a stint in public service, he turned to the corporate world and became a politician, serving first as state assemblyman and later as a

The party machinery on the ground will take care of this, says an Effendi associate.

'The effectiveness of a politician's role is likely to be gauged by the extent to which he can deliver on promises on development projects,' he adds. Effendi has the brains, charm and charisma of a leader, according to some of his strong supporters within the party.

There are, however, concerns that his extravagant lifestyle could lead to some reckless policies and over-spending that could put the state's finances into trouble. But his supporters argue that Effendi is a much-changed and matured politician who understands the burden of the responsibilities of state and public expectations.

'He has the charm and charisma of a leader that make people gravitate towards him,' was how one local politician described him. If Taib should decide within the next two to three years to finally call it a day, Effendi will only be 62 by then and, perhaps, more than ready to assume the mantle of state leader.

But until then, he has to contend with rivalry, which is likely to come from Abang Johari, who is a few years younger than him and has been described as a shrewd politician with fine oratory skills. He enjoys a close rapport with his constituents and comes from a well-known Malay family in Kuching, and is in close touch with the Malay community.

'Abang Jo', as he is fondly called, is known to be a clean politician and despite efforts to marginalise him within the party, he has refused to fade away from the scene. Even his boss, the Chief Minister, recognises the steeliness of his determination to stay on in politics and admires him for that.

Now that he cannot rely on being the No 2 or 3 in the party to be Taib's successor, he has to prove how he can pander to the majority of the party's elected representatives to win their support.

Awang Tengah is probably the dark horse. A valuer by training, he is regarded by many as being one of Taib's trusted confidantes. While Abang Johari has to contend with holding the state housing portfolio (which relies on Federal funding for many state projects), Awang Tengah — who is the state assemblyman for Bukit Sari in Lawas, northern Sarawak — is in charge of two important state ministerial portfolios: public utilities, and resource management and planning. This can be used to some political advantage in the years ahead in the race to the top. **mb**

Correction

In the interview with New Zealand High Commissioner to Malaysia David Kersey (Malaysian Business, Feb 1, 2007 issue) in the article entitled *Kiwi Joy*, we had erroneously quoted Kersey as commenting that the former Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin Syed Jamalullail, had described the relationship between the two countries as *akram*. It should have been *akrab*. The error is regretted.