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Najib strikes a chord with Sarawakians

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THE dessert course was about to be served when the emcee asked whether anyone in the audience would like to come up and sing.

Everyone looked at each other and Sarawak Chief Minister Datuk Abang Johari Tun Openg finally took the cue and made his way to the stage with three other Sarawak politicians.

The last Sarawak state election was memorable for its "singing CM" – the late Tan Sri Adenan Satem sang his way into the hearts of voters – but not many people have heard Abang Jo, as his successor is known, sing before.

The group sang a medley of four songs and that was when the peninsular guests at the dinner realised that Datuk Seri Nancy Shukri, a Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, has a superb voice.

The dinner was a special Hari Raya-cum-Gawai gathering hosted by the Prime Minister and his wife at their Seri Perdana residence for the Barisan Nasional leaders from Sarawak – 11 state Cabinet members and six federal ministers and deputy ministers.

It was a first for both sides and the camaraderie was made all the more interesting by the fact that just a week ago, Abang Johari had sent a fact-finding team to London to further Sarawak's claim for greater state autonomy.

Apparently, there are newly declassified documents and the team, which is still in London, has even engaged a Queen's Counsel to assist them in relooking the spirit of the Malaysia Agreement.

Analysis
JOCELINE TAN



The state government wants to back up its claim with facts and documents.

On the one hand, the two sides were mingling and chatting like old friends while, on the other hand, the move to decentralise state powers was going on.

"We want to discuss the division of powers, but it does not mean we want to break away from Malaysia. As our CM said recently, Malaysia before, Malaysia now and Malaysia forever," said a government official at the dinner.

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Abang Johari go back some ways and there is a comfortable body language between them.

When Tun Taib Mahmud was still in charge, there was a brief period when Abang Johari laboured under the perception that he was too close to federal leaders and some even claimed that it was held against him when Taib was choosing his successor.

Sarawakians want their leaders to exhibit a certain independence of spirit from the Federal Government be it on religion, education or simply their way of life.

Adenan started the state autonomy move and it is clear that Abang Johari feels as strongly about it. He

is taking it a step further to show that the Sarawak DNA runs through his blood.

It is understood that a top aide to the Chief Minister also handed over a letter to the Prime Minister's aide. The letter was to inform the federal side about the Sarawak government's aspiration for a greater division of power and an update on the London mission.

The live band that evening had been prepped about the Sarawak guests and it had earlier played the Chief Minister's favourite song *Kasih Sayang* as well as a Sarawak favourite *Berkikis Bulu Betis*, a melodic Iban ballad about a man who goes all out, climbing mountains and crossing rivers, to woo the girl of his dreams.

The ballad has become somewhat of a theme song for the Sarawak politicians because it signifies that you have to go all out to achieve what you want and they play it at almost every event in the state.

It was the perfect metaphor for the evening because of the next big fight for power, namely, the general election.

Najib, more than any other Prime Minister, has struck a chord with the Land of the Hornbills.

He went all over Sarawak during last year's state election, visiting remote longhouses that Adenan, who was then in frail health, could not. It was the great courtship of Sarawak and you could say he got the girl or rather the votes.

Another round of courtship has begun because Najib is now going after Sarawak's parliamentary seats.

Abang Johari is fully on board with him on this because the Chief Minister needs to hold on to the Barisan seats or to do better in order to strengthen his own position.

Barisan won 26 of the 31 parliamentary seats in 2013. A senior Sarawak minister, who was at the dinner, said Barisan is now eyeing three parliamentary seats that are currently held by DAP, namely Sibul, Miri and Sarikei.

During the state election last year, the votes that Barisan got in the state seats located in these three parliamentary constituencies had outstripped that of the Opposition. If the same voting pattern continues in the general election, the Barisan stands a good chance to win back the three parliamentary seats.

The dinner wrapped up at about 12.30am and one of the lingering highlights for the Sarawak delegation was the fact that the Chief Minister managed to get two rivals in his state Cabinet to sing a duet.

SUPP president Datuk Dr Sim Kui Hian and UPP president Datuk Seri Wong Soon Koh are what one might call frenemies in Abang Johari's government because their parties are eyeing the same voter base.

But they put aside their rivalry for the night and struggled their way through a popular Chinese song. It was not-top notch singing but they got the loudest applause.



Najib pays tribute to Felda's younger generation
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