

Sarawak's complicated coalition politics

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All Umno members must be Khalid al-Walids as much as they can

SO the political crisis within the Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP), a Barisan Nasional component, over many months has finally come to a head.

SPDP president Tan Sri William Mawan finally has had enough of the open rebellion of five of the party's elected representatives (an MP and four assemblymen).

Over many months, the five -- including several holding key party positions -- had simply refused to attend party meetings called by the party president.

It is a rather bizarre party conflict and Mawan clearly was left with little choice but to take disciplinary action in the end just to preserve his leadership credibility.

Mawan has quite cleverly sacked one assemblyman (and an assistant state minister) and removed the other four from their party posts, in the process attempting to head off the five coalescing as a group.

Thus, the state BN government is now in the position it had been for most of the last election cycle: having a "party-less" assemblyman serving still as assistant minister.

The precedent was set when assemblyman Larry Sng was sacked from the Parti Rakyat Sarawak but continued to serve as assistant minister even after a state cabinet reshuffle until he was eventually dropped as a candidate in the last state election.

That was a rather bad precedent. BN component parties stick to the tradition of not interfering in each party's internal affairs for the sake of cohesion within the coalition.

If a component party sacked one of its own, it should be incumbent upon the chief minister to remove that member from his government at the earliest opportunity in order not to stand accused of taking sides in the internal politics of a component party.

The Sng precedent might have simply emboldened SPDP elected representatives to use whatever pretext to go against their party leader on the safe assumption that it will not jeopardise their government positions in the process.

Any likelihood of a party resolving its own internal problems by itself thus becomes that much harder.

As it is, speculations are already rife that the SPDP party spat had been instigated from outside the party, hardly a healthy development for the state BN and something that cannot be credibly denied if the sacked assemblyman continues indefinitely as an assistant minister.

That eventuality may be averted if the sacked assemblyman found another BN component

party willing to take him into its fold.

Again, the Sng precedent shows this route to be unpromising. No party wants to be landed with another party's problem.

The added baggage of the problem assemblyman retaining his government position makes admitting him into another BN party that much more complicated as he will eat into the accepting party's quota of government positions.

Moreover, further complications will arise come the next election because the sacked assemblyman's seat will still be claimed by his original party.

We seem to be encountering an almost identical conundrum in Sabah when two ministers (and deputy chief ministers at that) jumped over to Parti Gerakan and retained their ministerial posts, though not their deputy chief ministerships, in the Sabah state government.

The Sabah Gerakan thus gained the windfall of two ministers in the state cabinet when it had not won any seat at all through any election.

With the general election looming, the Liberal Democratic Party can be expected to reclaim its right to field the candidate for one of the two seats although Gerakan may be able to salvage the other seat by the fact that it "belonged" originally to the Sabah Progressive Party which has since gone into opposition.

For the sake of overall BN cohesion, it may be best that any elected representative who happens to also hold a government position gives up his or her government position voluntarily and immediately once he or she loses membership (for whatever reason) in his or her party.

A chief minister should be given a free hand to pick members of his government without the complicating factors of being seen (fairly or otherwise) to be unduly interfering in the internal affairs of another component party or favouring one party over another when it comes time, inevitably, to decide whether an incumbent assemblyman or a candidate picked by the party to which the seat "belonged" should contest in a general election.

General elections down the road are going to be increasingly challenging.

The BN can do without the additional handicap of seeming disarray within and among its member parties.

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