

Two Opposition Fronts For Sabah?

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By Alan Ting

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 5 (Bernama) -- The launch of the Sabah STAR party tomorrow may have gone unnoticed if not for the advisory issued by the party's secretariat on Tuesday evening.

Interestingly, the advisory said that Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan, the political figure who has been trying to put together an opposition front comprising Sabah and Sarawak parties to contest the next general election, will attend the launch ceremony.

Apart from the United Borneo Front (UBF), the pressure group which he heads, Dr Jeffrey has so far roped in the Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP), a former Barisan Nasional (BN) component, and the unregistered Usno Baru into his so-called Borneo alliance.

And now, the alliance is set to add a new member, the Sarawak-based State Reform Party (STAR).

Political analysts and party insiders say that Dr Jeffrey, a former Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) vice-president, has tried in vain to register UBF as a political party in the past one year.

This may explain why STAR has agreed to expand its foothold in Sabah, despite having been dormant.

Talk is that the party has agreed to make Dr Jeffrey its chief for Sabah and later get local opposition parties in Sabah and Sarawak to form the "United Borneo Alliance" (UBA).

Political commentators believe Dr Jeffrey is using UBF as a springboard from which he will eventually be admitted to STAR and become its chief.

However, political analysts say the formation of another multiracial coalition in Sabah, especially among the opposition parties, will only benefit the ruling BN in the state where political players have a penchant for changing political affiliation frequently and forming new parties whenever an election is at hand.

Apart from the opposition PKR-DAP-PAS pact or Pakatan Rakyat, the effort by Dr Jeffrey's UBF along with SAPP, Usno and the Sabah People's Front (SPF), has created another opposition front -- the United Borneo Alliance (UBA).

"They will be fighting each other," said Assoc Prof Dr Bilcher Bala of Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS).

"They don't have a chance to win. This is exactly like the split among the opposition in the past. It will be very difficult for the opposition if they split up," he added.

He said many even believe that the rollout of the new Borneo opposition alliance is more of a preparation for the next general election, with STAR-UBF going for the votes of the Sabah

natives (Kadazan, Dusun and Murut), the SAPP going for the Chinese votes and Usno, together with SPF, going for the Muslim-Bumiputra votes.

But it is still a hard sell, he said.

"The biggest obstacle is that the people in Sabah and Sarawak are different. Culturally, they are the same, but in social life they are not the same. Political conditions are really different between the two states and their people," he added.

Initially, there was wide speculation that Dr Jeffrey will officially announce his political plans in the middle of last month during UBF's first anniversary gathering in Kota Kinabalu, but it did not happen.

However, political commentators say the presence at the event of STAR president Dr Dripin Sakoi, SAPP deputy president Amde Sidek and the head of a group trying to revive Usno (United Sabah National Organisation), Datu Badaruddin Tun Mustapha, appears to indicate that Dr Jeffrey is a step closer to realising his UBA dream.

As Datuk Johniston Bangkuai pointed out in his recent article in the New Straits Times, the formation of the UBA may be easier said than done as it will involve the question of who will be its leader.

Taking SAPP as an example, if the party decides to be part of the UBA, would its president Datuk Yong Teck Lee be ready to play second fiddle assuming that Dr Jeffrey heads the alliance, he asked.

"The parties concerned may share the same agenda but coming together under a common banner is something they have to sort out first," he wrote.

SAPP's Amde was reported to have said that they have not decided who should lead the alliance, but admitted that this is among the things that needs to be sorted out.

What position Dr Jeffrey will assume in UBA, if it becomes a reality, remains to be seen, as currently he is not president of a political party and his UBF is only a non-governmental organisation.

However, for Dr Bilcher Bala, the idea of having an opposition front comprising local Sarawak and Sabah parties is simply not workable due to the different views and objectives.

"Bottom line, there are always three different worlds -- peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak," he said.

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