

Deadlock likely in Sabah opposition seat talks
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KOTA KINABALU, March 12 — Seat negotiation on the opposition front in Sabah looks likely to break down with Pakatan Rakyat (PR) and Sabah-based parties heading on a collision course with one another ahead of a general election likely to be held by this June.

Separate interviews conducted with each contender for the coming polls indicate that neither side is willing to back down from their demands, although all parties have insisted that their “doors are always open”.

For the local opposition parties, namely Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) and State Reform Party (STAR), led by political bigwigs Datuk Yong Teck Lee and Datuk Jeffrey Kitingan respectively, consensus is only possible if they are allowed to contest the lion’s share of the 60 state seats up for grabs in Sabah.

This, party leaders told The Malaysian Insider recently, is to enable them to push through their “Sabah for Sabahans” agenda, which would see the state reclaim its autonomy.

But for the peninsula-based PR, largely DAP, all parties should first commit to the federal opposition pact before facing the Barisan Nasional (BN) giants in the polls.

They believe this would strengthen the opposition front in Sabah and on the federal level, as well as help topple the ruling pact from Putrajaya.

Speaking to The Malaysian Insider during a recent interview here, SAPP leaders said they were willing to help PR in their quest for Putrajaya but provided the pact allows them to form the Sabah state government by contesting in a little more than half of the 60 state seats available.

The leaders agreed that all opposition parties in Sabah must work together to ensure straight fights in all 60 state and 25 parliamentary seats and avoid splitting the opposition vote.

“Cooperation, I think, is still possible. Now, what we are trying to spell out is this — okay, you (PR) go to Putrajaya. And we, we have been talking about autonomy all the while... we are very firm on that.

“So if they respect this and we respect them, we can work together on that level,” SAPP secretary-general Datuk Richard Yong said.

For SAPP, the formula is simple — PR contests two-thirds of Sabah’s 25 parliamentary seats while SAPP snaps up two-thirds of the state seats. This, they said, is a win-win formula that would enable all parties to achieve their goals in addition to toppling BN.

“We have been compromising all this time. We never said we would contest in all the

seats... but to form the government, you need to win more than 30 seats," Yong said.

SAPP treasurer-general Dullie Marie, however, stepped in to say that despite his party's willingness to reach a consensus on seat negotiation, it would not compromise its mission on regaining autonomy for the state.

SAPP, he insisted, is the "launching pad" for Sabahans to regain their rights to oil revenue and customary land.

But the fiery politician agreed that it was likely the party's views would not be accepted by PR, noting that in a recent announcement, DAP leader Tan Kok Wai had already spoke of his party's plans to contest 20 state seats in Sabah.

Dullie's prediction may yet prove true. Other local Sabah leaders echo the same sentiment and agree that it is unlikely the Sabah opposition parties would approach the coming polls as a united front.

Said one SAPP leader, "In the first place, Pakatan is not even united. They cannot even agree among each other which seats they want to contest... how could they negotiate with us?"

When speaking to The Malaysian Insider, Sabah DAP chief Jimmy Wong confirmed that seat negotiation among PR parties DAP, PKR and PAS has yet to be finalised.

He said the pact is still negotiating 20 overlapping state seats and seven parliamentary seats.

Negotiation with Sabah's other opposition parties, he said, has yet to fall through despite the incessant bickering through the media.

"Our doors are always open. But our condition is simple... they must join PR. They must be united so we can have one front... not two. They must choose to be with PR or with BN," he said.

Wong said it was under PR's ideology to ensure that no single party should emerge the dictator or the marginalised, as the pact believes in equal distribution of power.

"We do not want to turn into Umno. Why keep thinking that we are peninsula-based? We are all Malaysians," he said.

Wong also confirmed receiving invitations from STAR to negotiate seat distribution and reiterated that DAP was open to all parties with a common agenda to topple BN.

The DAP leader's sentiments were shared by his colleagues in PKR.

"You want to be with Pakatan, you cannot just be my girlfriend... you have to marry me," said one local PKR leader.

But their demands may fall on deaf ears. Already, political observers have predicted that Sabah's fractured opposition front may never reach a consensus, much less play civil with one another should they ever meet at the negotiation table.

In an article two weeks ago, Sabah-based New Straits Times columnist Johniston Bangkuai

wrote that the opposition, in their eagerness to wrest power from BN, "have become confused".

"It is unlikely the opposition parties in Sabah will ever come to a consensus on one-on-one contests with the BN for the obvious reason that each one of them thinks they are superior to the others," he predicted.

The English daily writer admitted that similar tussles among BN component parties were not uncommon in the run-up to any election but said the pact's "high-level of political maturity and tolerance" would likely see them coming together when polling day arrives.

Federal seats in east Malaysia's Sabah and Sarawak are expected to be BN's focal point come the elections as both states, including the federal territory of Labuan, make up a whopping 57 seats, or 25 per cent of the 222 Parliamentary seats available.

In Election 2008, BN lost its customary two-thirds parliamentary majority largely due to significant losses in the peninsula, where it won just 85 seats while the opposition swept 80 seats.

BN's saving grace was in Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan where the pact trounced the opposition and made a near-clean sweep, winning 55 parliamentary seats to the opposition's two.

Today, following numerous MP deaths and defections, BN holds 138 parliamentary seats while opposition parties, including PR's PKR, PAS and DAP, PSM, SAPP and independents, hold 84 seats in the House.

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