

PBS wants Sabah RCI before polls
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KUALA LUMPUR, April 11 — Barisan Nasional's (BN) largest Sabah-based party has called for the formation of a royal commission of inquiry (RCI) into the problem of illegal immigrants in the state before the next general election as it would have little value after that.

Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) deputy president Datuk Seri Maximus Ongkili said his party had resolved at its November 2011 congress that an RCI into the influx of illegals, which has been blamed for the rise in social and economic problems there, must be formed in 12 months.

"We have put our party on the line for that; we want it. It must be done by this year. But the opportune time, of course, is before elections. Let's face it, it will not have much value if announced after elections," he told The Malaysian Insider.

BN had agreed to a parliamentary select committee on poll reforms to show its sincerity in having free and fair elections but opposition leaders have accused it of giving illegals in the state citizenship and voting rights since the 1980s to help it cling to power.

Ongkili, who chaired the recently-concluded bipartisan polls panel, said the federal government should "stick to the report of my committee, just form it" as the panel had recommended the RCI in its interim report just three months after being established.

"If it is not done, then we have to find good reason to explain to the people. If not, we have to make our stand. We will oppose the decision of not forming it," he said in a recent interview.

Najib had been expected to announce the RCI in February.

Pressed on whether PBS, which holds 12 of the 60 seats in the state legislative assembly, would leave the ruling coalition it joined in 2002 over the issue, the Kota Marudu MP said "we will consult our members, we have not reached that level because I am confident it will be formed."

According to replies provided in Parliament last year, Sabah's population was 651,304 in 1970 and grew to 929,299 a decade later. But in the two decades following 1980, the state's population rose by a staggering 1.5 million people, reaching 2,468,246 by 2000.

Media reports said that, as of 2010, this number has grown further to 3.12 million, with foreigners making up a sizeable 27 per cent or 889,799 of the population.

Opposition leaders have long railed against the BN government for this unusual population explosion, alleging that illegals have been allowed into the east Malaysian state, and given MyKads and voting rights to help the ruling coalition remain in control.

Datuk Seri Najib Razak has been coy on the status of the RCI, only saying in a press conference on February 23 that it is still under consideration.

It threw the highly-publicised issue back into uncertainty and fuelled concerns raised the previous week by Sabah BN leaders over Putrajaya's sincerity in forming the royal panel.

In early February, Sabah-based federal minister and United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO) president Tan Sri Bernard Dompok announced that the Cabinet had agreed to form the RCI.

State leaders had then expected Najib to formally announce the panel's formation during a two-day working visit the same month but the prime minister left without speaking on the issue.

This sparked rumours and Internet news reports of the possibility that Najib had backpedalled on the Cabinet's decision, with some even claiming a "secret meeting" of Umno warlords had warned the BN chief it would lose a sizeable chunk of votes if the RCI were to lead to a crackdown on the state's massive population of illegals.

A Sabah BN insider later told The Malaysian Insider that Cabinet meeting minutes showed that it had agreed to the RCI on February 8 and tasked Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Aziz to co-ordinate the scope of the RCI's investigation.

He said Najib's unexpected silence on the issue had not only angered but also embarrassed Sabah BN leaders, particularly those in UPKO and PBS, who have been trumpeting their success in pushing for the RCI.

But Ongkili said in the interview that he asks Najib "every two weeks" and the PM has given him an assurance that it will be "announced at an opportune time."

The four-term MP insisted that had Najib been asked by the press during his February trip to Sabah, "he would have announced it although the search for a chairman and members was still being done."

He said, however, the RCI was still not ready as "it is not an ordinary RCI because dealing with dead people is easy but living people is difficult," making a specific reference to the RCI into the death of Teoh Beng Hock, where legal action has yet to be taken on three anti-graft officers said to have pushed the DAP aide to suicide.

"Most RCIs are looking at defaulters or dead people, but this is living people. They are still there, it is not so easy," he said, referring to some illegals who have been in the state for over 30 years.

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