

I was told not to speak about the illegal immigrants problem in Sabah, Pairin tells Sabah RCI
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BY LEE SHI-IAN

Former Sabah chief minister Tan Sri Joseph Pairin Kitingan (pic) was aware of the problem of illegal immigrants in the state since the 1970s but he was reprimanded by his party, Parti Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah (Berjaya), for mentioning the issue in public.

He told the Royal Commission of Inquiry on illegal immigrants in Sabah that he was asked about the issue by a reporter in 1977.

"I said the problem fell under the jurisdiction of the federal government and they should do something to resolve the issue," Pairin told the five-man inquiry panel.

The 199th witness said when he returned to Sabah, he was reprimanded by the top leadership of the Berjaya party. At that time, Pairin was the assistant secretary-general of the party, which was led by Tan Sri Harris Mohd Salleh, the state's Chief Minister from 1976 to 1985.

"I wasn't clear exactly what I was being reprimanded for but I was made to understand that the issue of illegal immigrants and the issuance of identity cards were not to be mentioned again," said the veteran politician, now the state's deputy chief minister, in a packed courtroom.

"Illegal immigrants were flooding into Sabah without any documents and causing a lot of problems for the locals. They were taking away jobs, flooding the local market, rioting in certain parts of Kota Kinabalu and generally portraying a poor image of the state," said Pairin.

He added that he made a presentation to then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the late 1980s about the issue of illegal immigrants in Sabah. At that time, Pairin had just been sworn in as the seventh Sabah Chief Minister.

Pairin organised an amnesty programme for illegal immigrants in Sabah, where work permits were issued to those who could prove that they had a job and were employed by Malaysians. He said the purpose of the programme was to regulate the immigrants.

"During the programme, which was launched in June 1988, more than 60,000 illegal immigrants were given work permits to work legally in Sabah. However, the Immigration Department then stepped in and put a stop to the programme."

Pairin claimed that proposals to carry out similar programmes were met with negative reactions from the federal government.

He said the subject of immigrants was a very debatable issue as there were many things which didn't please the government.

He also claimed that the reason for Parti Bersatu Sabah's (PBS) narrow win in the 1994 state election was due to phantom voters.

He claimed that the phantom voters were illegal immigrants who held fake or original identity cards which had been issued in an indiscriminate manner.

"We brought the issue up with the Election Commission and asked them to remove these dubious names. However, we noticed that these names were back on the list again when the next election came around.

"In 2007, when PBS returned to the Barisan Nasional fold, we met with then Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and presented him with a memorandum on the emergence of new Bumiputeras in Sabah and illegal immigrants."

He said the presence of illegal immigrants should be resolved once and for all as these foreigners were not doing anything to help the security and safety of Malaysia.

It was, in fact, undermining the sovereignty of the country as a whole. - August 15, 2013.

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