

Putting the Past Behind it

Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak, mired in a leadership crisis, goes to the polls next month to decide who will lead it. Can it finally find a firm footing and lead its community?

By S C Chan

PARTI BANSA Dayak Sarawak (PBDS), which went through the ignominy of being de-registered by the Registrar of Societies (ROS) in December 2003 only to be reinstated three months later on appeal, is finally going to end its leadership crisis. Some 600 delegates from 204 branches will, on Oct 9-10, decide once and for all who will lead the party.

The dates for the party's triennial delegates conference (TDC) have been set, following the Barisan Nasional (BN)'s intervention, to give the 20-year-old party, which draws its membership largely from the Iban community, possibly its last chance to resolve its leadership crisis, or risk another and final round of deregistration.

At the time of writing, its two rival factions appeared to be on a more conciliatory note, with one trying to ascertain whether a compromised leadership line-up was still possible ahead of the party elections to replace the two separate TDCs which were subsequently ruled as invalid by the ROS, leading to the party's de-registration.

Faction leader Dr James Masing, the state Land Development Minister and former PBDS Information Chief, has long made it known that he aspires to be party chief, replacing Datuk Amar Leo Moggie



Moggie: His abrupt resignation as president last year caused a stir in the party

— whose sudden resignation as party president last year and the subsequent taking over of Deputy President Datuk Sri Daniel Tajem exacerbated the crisis. It gave the Tajem-led faction obvious advantages like replacing the pro-Masing appointed supreme council members with its supporters, thus denying the Masing faction control of the council.

Recently, however, amid signs that both factions may be battle-weary and were about to try for some form of a compromise,

Masing had a chance meeting with one of Tajem's supporters, party Vice-President and Ngemah state assemblyman Gabriel Adit, a cousin of Moggie, at a longhouse groundbreaking ceremony in Kanowit.

Masing's tone was conciliatory, and Adit was said to have reciprocated, as both spoke at the same function, shook hands and talked about land development schemes (plantations for Iban land-owners), with Masing promising that his ministry would only be all too prepared to assist.

In Kuching, Tajem followed up by saying that he was encouraging the younger group from both factions 'to mix around as the party's future depends on them'. He said he was getting old and as an elderly politician, wanted the younger leaders to decide on the party's future. This has been

interpreted by some quarters to mean that Tajem, who once served as Sarawak's Deputy Chief Minister and as Malaysian High Commissioner to New Zealand, may not stand in the coming party polls.

The Masing faction probably sees this as an opportunity to strike some sort of a deal, although some members of the Tajem faction claim that Masing and his staunch supporters, including the maverick party Vice-President Datuk Sng Chee Hua, have taken this position because they have been

pushed to a corner by recent political developments like the other state BN component having more or less closed its doors to any disgruntled PBDS elected representative and the stand taken by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who sent word through his aides that he wanted PBDS to remain intact and play a continued role in the BN.

Malaysian Business, however, understands that at a recent BN management committee meeting chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak, Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud had said it would be better to de-register PBDS. This was according to a Sabah BN leader who had also attended the same meeting.

Taib has been known to back the Masing group because of his dislike for Tajem, who was one of the leaders involved in the Ming Court affair that had tried to topple him as chief minister in 1987, although Masing was also part of it.

If the Masing group is only interested in securing the number one position for him, then its rivals are not prepared to sit down and discuss any compromise, according to a Tajem supporter. 'But we are prepared to discuss if Tajem remains as president with two deputy presidents, with one going to Masing and the other to Deputy Foreign Minister Datuk Joseph Salang Gandum.'

So, the crux of the matter is the pride and honour and perhaps the ambitions of two men — Tajem, a veteran politician who the Masing faction only recognises as caretaker president following the abrupt resignation of Moggie, and Masing, whom Tajem beat for the party's number two post in the previous TDC in 2000.

Both want to lead the party, and both are not prepared to give way.

Tajem leads a faction that comprises fewer elected representatives (three Members of Parliament (MPs) and two state assemblymen), but enjoys a certain advantage in that he heads a supreme council carried over from the 2000 TDC, with newly appointed members and control of the party headquarters and its affairs. Salang, the Julau MP, is Tajem's de facto number two in the party. It is no secret that Moggie wants him to take over the party eventually.

Masing, on the other hand, heads a faction

that comprises the majority of the party's elected representatives — five state assemblymen, including one state minister and two assistant ministers, and three MPs, including Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Joseph Entulu.

Both Tajem, a lawyer by training, and Masing, an Australian-trained anthropologist and former Sarawak Electricity Supply Corporation (Sesco) officer, come from the Iban community — the former from Sri Aman and the latter from Balleh, Rajang, in central Sarawak. Historically, the Ibans' rivalry has often been underscored by different geographical locations such as rivers and even tributaries. But nowadays, this, according to many in the community, is less the case than differences in personalities, or, according to more seasoned observers, more of 'everyone wanting to be a leader'.

This probably accounts for the fact that in Sarawak, the Iban, who make up about one-third of the state's 2.3 million population, are represented in all political parties; Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu Sarawak (PBB), Sarawak United People's Party (Supp), Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) and the Sarawak National Party (SNAP), besides PBDS.

The political unity of the Iban, and for that matter the Dayak (a term that also includes the Bidayuh and Orang Ulu such as the Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit, Lun Bawang, Murut, Penan, etc), is much less apparent than that of the Malay/Melanau/Muslim and, to a certain extent, the Chinese in Sarawak.

The Tajem-Masing rivalry dates back to the pre-2000 TDC years when Masing, then already a full state minister and a vice-president, was playing a dominant role in party affairs as secretary-general with Dublin Unting, one his strongest supporters whom he personally recommended to Taib for an assistant minister's post.

Moggie, then the party president, was spending much of his time in Kuala Lumpur, leaving much of the running of the party to Masing. Tajem, the deputy president meanwhile, was away in New Zealand.

It was, therefore, hardly surprising that Masing eventually decided to take on Tajem for the number two post at the 2000 TDC,

albeit losing. At that time, Tajem had the backing of Sng, one of the party's vice-presidents who was known to have wielded a lot of influence on the delegates.

For reasons that have never been clearly explained, Sng decided to switch camps later and has been Masing's No 2 and also the group's financier ever since.

At a recent BN-PBDS technical committee meeting, it was proposed that the 2000 TDC delegates list be used for the coming TDC, probably in a bid to avert any further acrimony if branches numbering more than 200 had to meet all over again to choose their delegates to attend the TDC and vote. This proposal was, in fact, first proposed by Masing but rejected outright by Tajem.

Lawyer Kilat Beriak, who is a supreme council member and chairman of the party's legal affairs committee, said: 'We are all geared up for the party elections in October. Our reservations concerning the use of the 2000 delegates list is purely based on its constitutionality, whether it is against the party constitution and the laws of the country.'

The Tajem faction now appears resigned to taking back most, if not all, the sacked party leaders and members. 'For the sake of the BN, we should have no problems in taking back nine. As for the remaining three, including Sng, Josephine Mawat and Unting, the disciplinary action is justified. If not us (the party), then who should take action (for working against BN's interest)?'

Sng is said to be less interested now to see a continuation in the protracted leadership dispute. His son, Larry Sng, 24, the state assemblyman for Pelagus, was recently appointed an assistant state minister, much to the displeasure of some of Masing's state assemblymen, especially Mong Dagang, the state assemblyman for Bukit Bagunan.

It is seen less of a disappointment to the Tajem camp since none of their state assemblymen, Stanley Ajang and Adit, aspired to be in the state Cabinet and did not expect to be appointed under the present circumstances.

How the BN-directed party elections will turn out depends very much on the cohesiveness of the two factions, or whether a compromise was worked out to save the party from a possible second round of de-registration. **mb**