

Graceful Exit for Taib?

If the writing on the wall is any indication, then long-serving Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud is preparing to call it quits from active politics. ■ by S C Chan

THERE are strong indications that Sarawak's long-serving Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, who celebrated his 70th birthday just after state elections in May, might call it quits after more than a quarter of a century at the helm, possibly before the end of the year.

Health could be a factor, after he underwent surgery in Singapore to remove a tumour in his colon suspected to be cancerous. His doctors have advised him to go for regular check-ups, and lately, his health has again cropped up as a subject of public speculation.

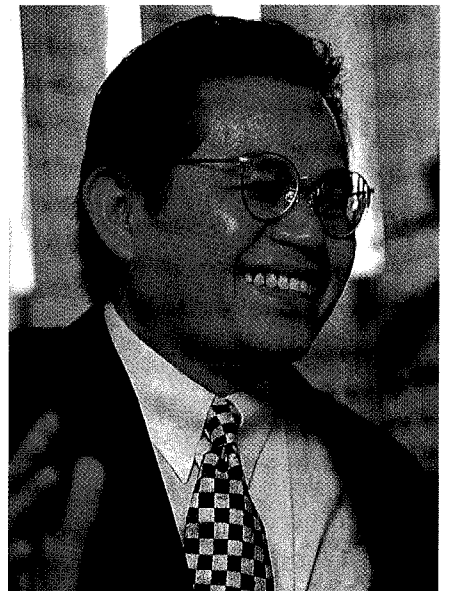
Another factor was his decision to call for state elections in May this year, six months before the state government's five-year term ended. Although the Sarawak Barisan Nasional (BN) was returned to power, again with a two-third majority (it won 62 out of the 71 seats in the State Legislative Assembly), the results were not what he and his party colleagues had expected.

Reacting to the Sarawak election results, Prime Minister and Federal BN Chairman Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi told reporters while on an official visit overseas that he had expected the results. The state BN was wounded in a way that it had not expected to be, as it had thought that it might make a clean sweep, or at the most, lose two to three seats.

Up to this day, Sarawakians are still wondering why Abdullah was not present during the election campaign. The Federal



Taib: Strong indications that the grand old man of Sarawak politics is on the verge of retiring



Effendi: In the running to take over from Taib

Cabinet's decision to reduce fuel and gas subsidies was thought to be ill-timed for the election, and might have had an impact among voters.

As it turned out, the Opposition knocked off nearly half of the seats, most predominantly Chinese, contested by the ruling coalition's second-largest member, the Sarawak United People's Party (Supp), Taib's staunchest ally since 1981 when he took over as Chief Minister from his uncle and political nemesis Tun Abdul Rahman Yakub.

Although his own Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) contested and won all 35 seats, this time, the BN had to contend with a group of young and well-educated Opposition-elected representatives — six from the Democratic Action Party (Dap) and one each from Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Sarawak National Party (SNAP) and independents.

If the long list of questions that have been submitted by the Opposition state assemblypersons to the State Assembly for reply during the first sitting, starting July 24,

is any indication, then the BN government is not going to have it as easy as in the past.

Many of the questions have been directed to the Chief Minister, with some pointedly about his family's many business interests such as Cahya Mata Sarawak Bhd (CMSB), which has been enjoying many of the state's lucrative contracts or projects since 1990. 'They've their hand in practically every pie ranging from forestry, plantations, construction, property development, banking and finance to manufacturing,' says a local investment analyst. 'But not every investment is doing well,' he says, adding that last year, the CMSB board was forced to make the painful decision of shutting down its steel rolling mill plant that led to the company suffering a huge loss.

On July 1 this year, Taib's second son Datuk Seri Sulaiman Abdul Rahman Taib, 38, relinquished his position as CMS Group chairman but remains a company director. Appointed new Group Chairman is Tan Sri Syed Zainal Anwar Syed Putra Jamalullai, a well-known corporate accountant and brother of the present Yang diPertuan Agong.

Market talk is that Taib's family may be gradually winding down its business interests. This not only involves the family-controlled Utama Banking Group (UBG)'s 32.8% stake in RHB Bank (to EPF and Canada's Bank of Nova Scotia) but also in CMSB (possibly to a Peninsular Malaysia-based Bumiputera investment group) as well as several large property development- and timber-based companies in Sarawak. It is anticipated that the family's business divestment could rake in RM1 billion to RM2 billion.

A local newspaper report about the visit of two Saudi Arabian princes to look at projects undertaken by the Naim Cendera Group in mid-July has added to the belief that the unwinding of the family business in Sarawak could cut across the board and not be confined to one or two major investments. Taib is said to be anxious to settle all this before he calls it a day in order to avoid any squabbles among his many siblings and children.

He was said to be rather distraught after his favourite businessman-brother Datuk Ariff Mahmud died last year of cancer, followed by the death of his mother while he himself was undergoing surgery in Singapore.

There was clearly anxiety for Taib on various fronts. Some people were, therefore, not surprised when he decided to call for state elections half a year before the government's term ended. According to some of his close political allies, after having dealt with election matters, he wants to focus on other important issues, including the PBB elections (postponed for a year since last year) and the succession issue.

Some political analysts suggest that Taib may make a deal with Federal leaders that would allow him to name his preference from PBB as his successor and that he be appointed the next Head of State for at least one term. (The term of the present Yang DiPertua Negeri, Tun Muhammad Salahuddin, expires in October this year).

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About a decade ago, Taib said he was grooming three senior PBB leaders as his possible successors — PBB Deputy President and State Housing Minister Datuk Seri Abang Johari Tun Openg, son of Sarawak's first post-independence Governor, the late Tun Haji Openg Abang Sapiee; PBB Senior Vice-President and former Natural Resources and Environment Minister Datuk Seri Adenan Satem; and PBB Vice-President and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Effendi Norwawi.

Most political analysts say the two to watch now are Johari, a Kuching Malay 'survivor' who is seen as a shrewd politician and a popular figure among his own community, and Effendi, who is seen as charismatic and smart with Melanau blood. Adenan is said to have had a falling-out with Taib, whom he once described as his 'boss and mentor' and is generally thought to be already out of contention.

The picture is likely to be clearer after the PBB Convention, expected to take place in September this year, either in Miri or

Mukah. There is talk that there may be a challenge for one or two top party posts, although Taib has indicated to some senior party colleagues that he prefers a status quo, except for vacant posts like a senior vice-president's post for the Pesaka (Dayak) wing and a vice-president's post for the Bumiputera (Malay/Melanau) wing that need to be filled.

Party seniority, however, is not necessarily an entitlement for consideration for ministerial appointments or promotions. Four years ago, the PBB amended its constitution to set up a Parliamentary caucus comprising elected representatives and senators of the party who will nominate an elected representative as candidate for the Chief Minister's post.

Political analysts have described the special constitutional provision as offering political expediency for Taib in that the caucus is an option to circumvent certain obstacles or difficulties of going through the party's *Majlis Tertinggi* or Supreme Council. And whoever such a caucus decides will be the candidate for the Chief Minister's post is also expected to become party leader as well. It is now said that Taib may find this added provision in the party constitution redundant, for a number of reasons.

In his exit-from-politics plan, Taib could, after consulting party colleagues, let the Prime Minister, as head of the Federal BN and Umno, make the final decision on who should be his successor from among a list of two or more short-listed candidates. As for his seats, there is a possibility that his son Sulaiman may contest them. This could be a prelude to paving the way for Umno's entry into Sarawak in a post-Taib era. Therefore, the political scenario within the second half of the year or into the next year could see some dramatic changes and developments, according to most political observers.

Even Taib's many loyal supporters acknowledge that the long-serving Chief Minister now deserves to bow out. After being used to his leadership style, which in recent years has come under increasingly strong criticism from many quarters, Sarawakians may end up with a new Chief Minister who is less assertive and forceful, like his Sabah counterpart Datuk Musa Aman, and who will listen more to Federal leaders, especially from Umno. **mb**