

POLITICS, SARAWAK STYLE

Sarawak is set for state elections this year. We look at the many facets which make up its power play.

By S C Chan

THE ONLY certainty in present-day Sarawak politics is that the state election will be held this year. As the present administration's five-year term ends on Nov 18, the election will have to take place before that. The question is: When?

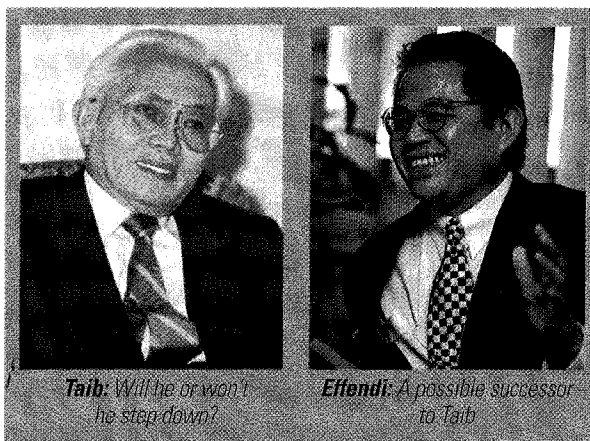
And if there's one person who should know the date, it would be the long-serving Chief Minister and State Barisan Nasional Chairman Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud. Even then, when Taib spoke to the local media in mid-February, he said he was 'not in a position to announce yet (the date of the election)'.

Almost without exception, political analysts agree that the chances of the Opposition causing an upset in the election are as remote as the 'moon turning blue'. This is not to say that Taib has no worries.

After 25 consecutive years as chief executive of one of Malaysia's richest states, and after having undergone surgery recently to remove a tumor suspected to be cancerous from his colon, the almost-70 Taib knows that sooner or later he will have to go. Again, the question is: When?

About seven years ago, he named three of his own Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) leaders — Datuk Seri Abang Johari Tun Abang Openg (Deputy President {Bumiputera Wing}), Datuk Seri Adenan Satem (Senior Vice-President) and Datuk Seri Mohd Effendi Norwawi (Vice-President) as being groomed by him as possible successors to take over the party as well as state leadership.

Today, the trio, older and perhaps wiser and still very much in politics, are ready to



Taib: Will he or won't he step down?

Effendi: A possible successor to Taib

take over.

Although Taib has never mentioned publicly any name, or indicated who should take over from him, many people seem to think that it is likely to be Adenan — the party's 62-year-old senior vice-president who quit in February as Natural Resources and Environment Minister to play a more active role in Sarawak politics.

But Taib is now saying that he is not about to step down any time soon.

In separate closed-door meetings he called for in mid-February with state component party leaders from the Chinese-based Sarawak United People's Party (Supp) and Dayak-based Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) and Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS), Taib was said to have mentioned that any power transition would be gradual so as to not affect foreign investments.

A Supp State Assemblyman who attended the meeting, speaking on the condition of anonymity, tells *Malaysian Business* that

the Chief Minister spoke 'most enthusiastically' about the Ninth Malaysia Plan, particularly about the implementation of several big projects in Sarawak. This is probably to indicate that he would oversee the implementation of these projects before deciding to step down. This is believed to include the multi-billion-ringgit aluminium smelter plant in Bintulu, an oil-and-gas project in Mukah and a state-owned wafer foundry in Kuching.

During his visit to Kuching for the BN Backbenchers Retreat, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi even helped to dispel doubts about Taib's health. In what must have come as a disappointment to

many of his opponents as well as those within the state BN anxious to see a change in the state's top leadership, Abdullah said the Chief Minister was 'healthy and strong enough to continue to lead the state'.

'I am still trapped for some time,' Taib told the media, clearly intending to kill speculation about his stepping aside soon (presumably for health reasons) and appointing an acting Chief Minister before

the polls.

The Election Commission has announced that the training of election officials has been completed, and that the latest electoral roll was to have been gazetted by the end of February. This would mean that elections could be held as early as this month. Political observers, however, say it will be held after Parliament has approved the Ninth Malaysia Plan. This could be either before or after June.

Taib's other worry, to a lesser extent, is some of the internal problems within his own party, PRS and to a certain extent Supp. The latter's top leadership is under pressure to consider at least a state seat for its youth wing, among others.

To set his succession plan in motion, he has at least two options in circumventing the PBB hierarchy issue — to call for party polls and (assuming Adenan is his choice) to tell delegates that he is stepping down as party president and giving way to Adenan and then trying to persuade Johari, seen as having stronger grass-roots Malay support, to accept

this and promise him he will be returned unopposed as deputy president.

Taib can clearly see the difficulty in trying to bring Adenan in and appoint him as acting Chief Minister now, as there are two more senior party leaders — Deputy Chief Minister and Minister of Rural Development Tan Sri Alfred Jabu, who is PBB Deputy President (Dayak wing), and Johari.

According to a political historian, Taib is unlikely to do that even if he wanted to, as he can still recall what happened in the late 1970s when his uncle, the-then Chief Minister Tun Abdul Rahman Yakub, was already under immense pressure to step down and he had to fight to be made one of PBB's two deputy presidents. It would have put Rahman in a more difficult position to make Taib his successor without holding the deputy president's post as party president and Chief Minister on March 21, 1981. (Rahman was appointed the Yang DiPertuan Negeri on April 1, 1981 and served for one term).

Most observers expect Taib, however, to ask Adenan to rejoin the state Cabinet if the date of the state election remains undecided for some time. Adenan will probably be given a minister's post (there is still one full minister's post available), assigned to the Chief Minister's Office and asked to cover for the Chief Minister in his absence, as he has been doing for the last two years even while serving in Kuala Lumpur as a Federal Minister.

Another worry of Taib is how his partners — the Dayak-based parties, especially the PRS, an offshoot of the now-defunct Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS) — are going to fare in the state election. The most imminent danger seems to come from the yet-to-be-registered Malaysian Dayak Congress (MDC), whose de facto leader and advisor is former Deputy Chief Minister and ex-PBDS President Datuk Seri Daniel Tajem. Tajem is still highly regarded within the Iban community for his stance on various issues, especially the native customary rights (NCR) land issue which is adversely affecting the rural Dayak community.

If the party is registered in time for the election, it could pose a serious challenge in many Dayak seats, especially in Iban-majority seats held by PRS and SPDP and possibly even PBB and Supp, although as a new Dayak opposition party without being

seen as having any strong financial backer, it would be hard to match the resources of the BN parties.

MDC's protem president Nicholas Bawin, who is also Sarawak Dayak National Union (SDNU) president, is seen as the Dayak opposition group's best bet to secure a seat. He will be taking on PRS Vice-President and State Assistant Minister Dublin Unting in the Batang Ai state constituency.

Bawin is said to have the strong backing of veteran Iban politician Jawah Gerang, the five-term Member of Parliament for Lubok Antu formerly of PBDS. Gerang, who remains partyless, stood on a BN ticket in the last parliamentary election and is determined to hit back at PRS, especially Unting, the incumbent in Batang Ai and one of PRS President and State Land Development Minister Dr James Masing's loyal supporters, whom he had accused of openly campaigning against him during the last parliamentary election.

MDC, part of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim-inspired Bumiputera (opposition alliance involving also Sarawak National Party {SNAP}) and state Parti Keadilan Rakyat (Keadilan), is expected to contest at least seven seats, currently allocated to PRS. SNAP is to take on SPDP in at least eight seats. Keadilan will contest in Malay seats, but it is not known at this stage whether it will take on PBB in all its 28 Malay or Melanau-majority seats. Pas has been obscured following its dismal performance in the last election, and it is not known if it will field any candidate this time around.

PRS and SPDP have been encouraged by the state BN leadership to merge in order to pool their resources and fight the new challenge from the Dayak opposition. But following recent events and developments, any merger talk appears to have been put on the sidelines for the time being.

PRS Deputy President Datuk Sng Chee Hua tells *Malaysian Business*, 'There's no rush. It can take place after the election. We want to concentrate on the election and win all the nine state seats, including Ngemah and Belaga, for BN.' But the incumbents, Gabriel Adit and Stanley Ajang, for Ngemah and Belaga respectively, formerly of PBDS and partyless until recently, have already decided to join SPDP, which is led by State Social Development and Urbanisation

Minister Datuk William Mawan.

What is also possible is that PRS may eventually give up the idea of having the two seats (Ngemah and Belaga) in return for one of SPDP's seats (either the new state seat of Bekenu or Batu Danau). If this were to happen, then the two parties will end up with eight seats each.

The least of Taib's problems is how his own PBB, especially the Bumiputera (Malay/Melanau) wing, will fare. A Malay political observer notes, 'PBB candidates are considered elected when they are nominated by the party.' It shows the confidence in Malay/Melanau support for PBB.

PBB has the lion's share (35) of the 71 seats, including nine new ones up for grabs. Of the 35, 28 are either predominantly or majority Malay or Melanau seats, with the rest being Dayak (Iban/Bidayuh/Orang Ulu) seats.

The only credible opposition appears to be the DAP, which, as usual, is expected to mount a strong challenge to Supp. It is now to contest in 19 seats, of which 14 are urban or Chinese-majority seats, mostly in Kuching, Sibuan and Miri. In the last election, it conceded one seat to the DAP (Kidurong).

But in recent years, there have been murmurings both within the party as well as the community as to the effectiveness of Supp's representation in the government. Some party leaders have publicly spoken of their discomfort about the rather close ties that Supp President and Deputy Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr George Chan Hong Nam shares with Taib (Taib's son Sulaiman, incidentally, is married to Chan's daughter).

Supp leaders have warned that should it fail to win all 19 seats, the party will lose its No 2 position within the coalition and, to quote senior Supp Sibuan leader and State Assistant Minister of Housing Dr Soon Choon Teck, it would represent a setback for the party. He did not explain how, but presumably it would have less say than the Dayak group if the merged entity made up of PRS and SPDP were to eventually materialise.

State DAP Chairperson Wong Ho Leng says, 'Why should they be concerned only with the numbers game by continuing to be No 2? Why are they not asking to be No 1? Instead, they should ask themselves how effective they have been in serving the people. As far as I know, they only play second fiddle in the administration.' 