

Open contests pledge sparks debate on PRS presidency

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Prof. Datuk Dr Jayum Jawan

KUCHING: Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS), which will hold its Triennial Delegates Conference in October this year, has thrown the door wide open to contests for all positions in the party.

But will the post of party president, currently held by Datuk Joseph Salang Gandum following the death of its founding president Tan Sri James Jemut Masing, be contested?

It is anybody's guess at the moment but there is a school of thought that suggests party members will ultimately settle for a compromise in the interest of unity ahead of the next state elections which must be held within the next two years.

So will PRS' members keep the status quo with Salang or 'agree to' another leader taking over the helm of the party?

One thing is certain – a contest for the party's top post may fracture party unity which will not be in the interest of the ruling Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) state government.

Academy of Sciences Malaysia Fellow, Datuk Prof. Dr Jayum Jawan, for one, is convinced PRS needs a good and firm leader to bring the party to the next level.

"As PRS is a GPS component, he must be respected by other component leaders, and his words 'the' authority as to who will represent PRS as GPS candidates in the next election and in government," he said.

Jayum, who is also Adjunct Professor at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) and a member of National Unity Advisory Council, said for now there is no leading candidate seen as capable of taking the position of presidency with ease.

"None of the party's lawmakers, including those holding important positions in GPS and the federal MADANI governments, has really distinguished himself from their peers.

"They could be described by an Iban adage as 'nadai kala didinga kukok' or 'enda ditemu pantuk'," he said.

However, Jayum added this will be a significant milestone in PRS' history as it will be an important event for the party to move beyond Masing's shadow.

It will be the first time the party is going back to ask the grassroots members who they want to lead their party.

Having said that, he pointed out that members of the party's supreme council are divided on whether to have open contests or strike a compromise to prevent division after elections.

"The deal especially refers to the position of the president.

"Although it has been reported that the party election is open, inside sources say that a compromise is still actively being pursued to prevent contest for fear of division thereafter," Jayum added.

"But what does a compromise mean? Would it mean retaining the incumbent Salang?

"Could it also mean that a leader has been agreed to by factions within the party?

"If so, who could be that 'compromise' person agreed to by party factions?"

In either scenario, he felt it will still be a compromise to prevent clashes among various factions.

What's in play here is that the coveted presidency decides the fates of all lawmakers and their positions in government.

Thus, the compromise may not be on who can be agreed upon to lead but more about lawmakers trying to safeguard their respective position, he said.

In this respect, Jayum cautioned against reading too much into a recent online survey which surmised that its Women leader, Datuk Seri Doris Sophia Brodie is the preferred choice for president.

She is held in high regard compared to other PRS leaders, but the netizen respondents are not all members of PRS.

“So, the opinion and perception was not of PRS members who have the authority to give official opinions, therefore showing the true sentiment of PRS members.

“In any event, if the result were to be taken at value, the online polls garnered by Doris are still very low to show she is preferred over others to lead the party.

“She had polled about 16 per cent, the highest, but the total votes were 88 out of about 500 netizen votes.

“That is not really convincing,” he said.

On another note, the announcement by PRS Youth Chief, Datuk Snowdan Lawan, that he wishes to step down, has stirred much speculation.

Some observers say it could signal PRS’ broader commitment to rejuvenation and relevance amid Sarawak’s evolving political landscape.