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## **MALAYSIA'S 13TH GENERAL ELECTION IN SABAH: FACTORS DETERMINING THE WINNERS**

*Sabah voters in the 13th Malaysian General Election were considered a Barisan Nasional (BN) "fixed deposit" and Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak had proclaimed that his party would actively work on enhancing this edge to sustain their dominance. Pakatan Rakyat (PR), of the opposition coalition acknowledged the threat and took steps to neutralise it. Initially, the opposition parties believed that they had a fifty percent chance or more to capture Sabah to form both the State and Federal governments and, on reading contemporary discussions in the social media, it is easy to see why. However, the main stream media persisted in promoting the government as a sure winner and, as GE 13 drew nearer, the tide changed to favour BN. This paper determines the strategies and issues that proved to be effective in winning state and parliamentary seats in Sabah.. Further, it investigates the impact of the Suluk incursion in Lahad Datu on the election, seeking to discover how the political parties involved exploited and benefited from this tragic incident. Finally, this paper explores the people who were instrumental in influencing the tide of change in Sabah's GE 13.*

**Keywords:** *General election, Sabah, political parties, government, opposition*

### **Introduction**

For Malaysia's 13th General Election (GE 13) the "Land below the Wind" as Sabah is popularly known, the storm for change blew very strongly. The significance of GE 13 was that for the first time challenges advanced by the opposition parties of the ruling parties appeared sufficiently strong to support opposition dreams of capturing Putrajaya. Both social and mainstream media were alive with claims and counter claims of both parties. This paper analyses party strategies (both incumbent and opposition) as covered largely, but not exclusively in the social media. As well, in-depth interviews were held with 30 opinion leaders in the small sub-district of Kiulu in the district of Tuaran. Kiulu was chosen because it is one of the major areas in West Coast Sabah where the Kadazan-Dusun population dominates and where the battle to win the hearts and minds of the group was intense.

Sabah was clearly the state to watch for during Malaysia's GE 13. Various political party leaders including the Prime Minister and Barisan

Nasional (BN) Chairman Najib Razak flew in and out of Sabah several times. He and several BN leaders visited several districts of importance to the ruling government and to BN's future survival.

Political opposition chiefs have also taken significant time from their local seat campaigns to rally support for their Sabah coalitions. This indicated that opposition political parties were stepping up their game to try and break new ground and win big in Sabah. As well, Pakatan Rakyat (PR) leaders from the Peninsular, especially Anwar Ibrahim followed in almost all of Premier Najib's footsteps.

Apparently, Anwar's or PR's GE 13 campaign strategy was to focus on Sabah and Sarawak. Both states were claimed by BN as its "fixed deposits", which means a stable or reliable form of return (in the form of votes) from an investment (in development goods). In the last election (the GE 12) both Borneo states have given BN the lifeline to stay in power. Had these two states not formed a voters bank for the BN its federal government position would indeed be perilous.

Clearly, one of Anwar's strategies for the 13 GE was to bog down Najib in Sarawak and Sabah so that Peninsular Malaysia, Johor in particular, would be left unattended by the latter. Every time Najib visited the Borneo states, Anwar would follow soonest. Anwar claimed he did that in order to demolish Najib's lies and hype and update the people on what he meant to be the real situation.

Many of the online media reported that BN Sabah has begun hitting out at Anwar in panic as a person willing to desert the people of Permatang Pauh, his parliamentary seat in Penang, so that he could focus on Sabah and Sarawak. It stated that Anwar would resume his campaign trail in Permatang Pauh at the last minute in between breaks from Sabah and Sarawak (Aidila Razak 2013).

Clearly, Sabah and Sarawak, while being precious to BN and facing 50:50 situations, were also strategic fallback for the oppositions. The BN in Sabah was not expected to do better than the GE 12. The oppositions felt that the major factor for this was that during the Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) there were revelations of BN rogue elements reportedly placing immigrants regarded illegal by the State on the electoral rolls. The Opposition felt that the illegal immigrant issue angered a majority of Sabahan; especially Christians since a majority among the immigrants involved were Muslims. It also angered other indigenous groups for the immigrants seemed to have easily earned their citizenships. They believed these newcomers would soon outnumber them. In a democracy this could create a perilous future for indigenous Sabahans.

However, many political analyses felt that the determining factor for BN's ability to continue ruling Sabah lies in the fact that they were more united in facing GE 13. For example, the opposition parties were pitted not just against BN but also among themselves (Aidila Razak 2013). Despite pre-

election calls for the opposition parties to reach an understanding so as to ensure straight fights with the BN, only the N.59 Tanjung Batu state seat and the P.186 Sandakan parliamentary seat were seeing one-to-one contests. As it turned out, BN won the Tanjung Batu seat while the DAP took the Sandakan seat. Still it would be very difficult to predict who would have been victorious if the two constituencies have more candidates contesting.

Further, Sabah politically was considered as a BN "fixed deposit". In Sabah there are 60 state seats and 25 parliamentary seats to be contested. Results of GE 12 show that in 2008 BN won 59 out of 60 state seats and 24 of the federal seats out of 25 parliamentary seats. However, soon after GE 12 the Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) left the BN coalition depriving it of two state seats. Consequently, the political parties composition in the Sabah State Legislation prior to dissolution for the GE 13 was BN with 57, SAPP with 2 and DAP with 1 seat. In GE 13 BN retained 48 state seats, a loss of 11 seats. The newly established Pakatan Rakyat (People Pact) or better known as PR won 11 seats, and the freshly formed Sabah-base State Reform Party (STAR) took a seat through its President Jeffrey Kitingan. Another Sabah-centred or local party, the SAPP which quit BN had two seats prior to GE 13. The SAPP left the BN to champion Sabah for Sabahans but was left with no seat, either for state or parliament. (Aidila 6/5/2013). According to a majority of Sabah's political observers, based on the local political scenario, the GE 13 was probably the most crowded in the state's electoral history. For example, 92 candidates were contesting for the 25 parliamentary seats and P191 Kalabakan parliamentary seat having seven candidates contesting against each other. The 2013 Sabah state election was held on 5 May 2013 concurrently with GE 13. This was Sabah 12th state election.

## Background

Sabah as one of the 13th state of Malaysia has its own unique political environment. Together with Sarawak, Singapore and Malaya it formed Malaysia. With Singapore out of Malaysia certain political leaders in the two Borneo states felt that their positions and special rights within the Federation have been compromised within the context of the 1963 Malaysia Agreement. This issue has been persistently raised, especially in Sabah. It has become a big campaign issue by the locally based political parties, namely by the STAR and SAPP, especially in the GE 13. This issue was very well played up by the Party Bersatu Sabah (PBS), an indigenous Kadazan-Dusun political party when it defeated Party Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah (BERJAYA), also conceived in Sabah, and a component of the Barisan Nasional (BN) and Sabah ruling party then (Doolittle, 2007). However, when PBS joined BN, it is perceived as not as vociferous in playing the issue of Sabah sovereignty and illegal immigrants as compared when it was outside BN and especially when it went all out to

oust BERJAYA.

Prior to Malaysia formation in 1963, the then North Borneo interim government submitted a 20-point agreement to the Malayan government as conditions for Sabah becoming a partner in forming Malaysia. Subsequently, North Borneo legislative assembly agreed to be a partner of Malaysia formation on the condition that these state rights based on the 20-point agreement were safeguarded. Sabah hence becomes part of Malaysia formation as an autonomous state based on the 1963 Malaysia Agreement and the 20-points conditions.

However, beginning from the second tenure of BERJAYA's administration under Chief Minister Harris Salleh there triggered this prevailing opinion amongst Sabahans that Sabah autonomy was gradually eroded under federal influence and hegemony. Amongst political contention often raised by Sabahans, particularly by local opposition parties are the cession of Labuan Island to Federal government and unequal sharing and exploitation of Sabah's petroleum resources (Lim, 2008). This has resulted in strong anti-federal sentiments. It included occasional call for secession from the Federation from certain quarters of the Sabah population. It also caused BERJAYA's downfall when it lost out to its own breakaway group, the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS). PBS had used the increasingly anti-federal sentiments to its advantage. This anti-federal sentiment persistently simmers and is being continuously fanned by locally born political parties. The anti-BERJAYA sentiment was further strongly fanned when Harris Salleh downgraded the district of Tambunan into a sub-district (Lim 2008).

The anger and the resentment of the people of Sabah to Harris Salleh "gifting away" Labuan to the Federal Government and the downgrading of Tambunan into a sub district was so strong that despite the than Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad statement of "sink or swim" with BERJAYA still saw the party sinking Lim 2008).

If Mahathir's statement was meant to scare Sabahans it clearly boomeranged. BERJAYA defeats spell its doom while the federal government merrily swam away leaving the party to drown. This episode showed that while Sabahans yearned for development their pride and their rights are still priority. All parties contesting in Sabah need to pay special attention to this in order to win.

In GE 13 two of the indigenous political parties, STAR and SAPP fully exploited this sentiment. However, local political parties in BN, including PBS who had been championing Sabah rights have stuck to the BN manifesto and even try to downplay the claimed eroding of Sabah's autonomy. They instead claimed they are doing the best to ensure Sabah autonomy remains intact or even better.

Reflecting on GE 13 outcome it seemed clear that the issue of Sabah autonomy being eroded and anti-federal sentiment cannot be winnable election

weapons when the Opposition was disunited. Yet SAPP and STAR leaders were unrepentant and persisted separately on the two claims.

Nevertheless, how BN, the GE13 winner manages the two claims will determine whether the claims will ease off or persistently reappear. If left unresolved chances are that it will continue to raise its ugly head. This would be bad for Najib's Malaysia effort. It is worthwhile noting that together with Kelantan, Terengganu and Penang, Sabah is among the four states where opposition parties have ruled. Led by Joseph Pairin Kitingan, a local born party, Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) formed Sabah State Government after winning the 1985 General Election. PBS ruled Sabah until 1994 or for nine years. However, despite winning the 1994 General Election, a number of PBS winners defected to BN. This resulted in BN having majority seats to form the government.

Further, numerous interventions by Federal government create a major source of contention in Sabah politic (Cheah 2002). For example, introduction and later abolition of the rotational chief minister's post and earlier PBS-BERJAYA conflict in 1985, along with co-opting rival factions in Sabah, was seen as political ploys by the UMNO-led, BN federal government to control and manage the State autonomous power.

However, the federal government tends to view these actions as justifiable since parochialism displayed amongst Sabah politicians is disharmonious with nation building. This complicated Federal-State relations hence becoming a source of major contention in Sabah politics (Cheah 2002; Regina 2008).

## **Sabah Population Composition and Its Political Implications**

Knowledge of the population is critical in the formulation of all campaigns. This include political and election campaigns. According to the Statistics Department of Malaysia the population of Sabah in 2010 stood at 3,117,405. Sabahans are divided into 32 officially recognised ethnic groups, in which 28 are recognized as Bumiputra, or indigenous people. The largest indigenous ethnic group is Dusun (17.8% or 555,647), followed by Bajau 14% or 436,672), Brunei Malays (5.71% or 178,029) and Murut (3.22% or 100, 631). Other indigenous groups comprise 20.56% or 640,964 individuals. They include Rungus, Iranun, Bisaya, Tatana, Lun Bawang/Lun Dayeh, Tindal, Tobilung, Kimaragang, Suluk, Ubian, Tagal, Timogun, Nabay, Kedayan, Orang Sungai, Makiang, Minokok, Mangka'ak, Lobu, Bonggi, Tidong, Ida'an (Idahan), Begahak, Kagayan, Talantang, Tinagas, Banjar, Gana, Kuijau, Tombonuo, Dumpas, Peluan, Baukan, Sino, Jawa and Cocos.

As expected, with the largest number, the Dusun has more political clout compared to other indigenous groups. At least three Sabah indigenous political parties have Dusun majority memberships. However, it also meant

lots of generals with not too many soldiers. It also created intense fights to gain recruits and supporters among the not too many Dusun and Kadazan communities. Nevertheless, if the three parties are strongly united and strategise cleverly they can achieve much for their people.

The largest non-indigenous ethnic group is the Chinese with 13.2% of Sabah population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010). The predominant Chinese dialect group in Sabah is Hakka, followed by Cantonese and Hokkien. Most Chinese people in Sabah are concentrated in the major cities and towns, namely Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan and Tawau. Unsurprisingly, for GE 13 both Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan were won by DAP. This phenomenon is similar in major cities and towns in Sarawak and Peninsular states. In Sabah, for example in Sandakan it must be noted that it has always been the Chinese calling the shots. Thus, for example, unsurprisingly the BN had allocated it to the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), a minor Chinese political party having its base mainly in Sabah. Its President, Liew Vui Keong won the GE 12. However, LDP lost the GE 13 to DAP. Thus, currently LDP has no parliament seat. In this case the winning factor was not race but rather issues or that PR manifesto was deemed more attractive than BN or even that the Chinese have lost faith in BN. It can also be the candidate factor itself. This was because both candidates for Sandakan were Chinese.

Further, it is to be noted that a number of state seats and a parliamentary seat won or captured by the opposition parties are in the Dusun Christian dominant constituencies. For example, of the three Parliamentary seats captured by the Opposition in Sabah, two are in the Chinese majority urban areas of Sandakan and Kota Kinabalu and one in Penampang, a suburban Kadazan-Dusun majority constituency. Also, of the 12 state seats won by the Opposition, three are in Chinese dominant constituencies and nine are in Dusun majority areas. Of the 12 state seats captured by Oppositions, 11 have Peninsular origins or Federal based. Only one Sabah party, the State Reform Party or popularly known as STAR captured a state seat. It is won by its President, Dr Jeffrey Kitingan in Bingkor, Keningau. The other Sabah party the Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) led by Yong Teck Lee, a former Sabah Chief Minister lost all contested seats. Thus, in Sabah the decreased BN Seats cannot be attributed to Chinese Tsunami, but probably more of a Dusun Tsunami. After all, Chinese votes in Malaysia, more so in urban areas have generally favoured opposition parties, especially for the DAP.

Other non-indigenous citizens comprised about 1.5% or 47,052 of the Sabah population. There is a much smaller proportion of Indians and other South Asians in Sabah compared to other parts of Malaysia. Unsurprisingly, there is no Indian based political party in Sabah or MIC State Assemblyman. But, there are a number of non-governmental organisations with Indian leaders in Sabah. Non-Malaysian citizens with legal status (Filipino, Indonesian): 27.81% (867,190) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010). However, it is

difficult to estimate the illegal, may it be Filipino, Indonesian, Pakistani, and others.

It is important to continue stressing that the issue of illegal immigrants having easy access to citizenship and the right to vote will increasingly become a very potent issue as to determine the outcome of any election in Sabah if is not resolved to the satisfaction of the indigenous Sabahans. It can be said that if this issue is not amicably resolved it can be a minus factor for BN.

The staggering increase of the Sabah population from 651,304 in 1970 to 3,117,405 in 2010 or more than 400 percent increase make it a very big political issue. It has made Sabah from among the least populated state to the third most populous in Malaysia.

As well, Sabah has now become the state containing the most number of immigrant citizens and illegal aliens. The very fast population growth is attributed to the presence of legal and illegal immigrants. There are allegations that their coming is possibly state-sponsored from the Muslim-dominated southern provinces of Philippines and also from Indonesia who are of Malay stock and mostly Muslims being granted citizenship. Also, there are allegations that the federal government is involved. The allegation is that this is done to sustain BN superiority in Sabah on the ground that the Muslims generally favour the BN.

Thus, it is unsurprising that indigenous Sabahans, especially the native Christians are increasingly becoming very unhappy with this development. In a democracy where more numbers could lead to an increase power the fear of being displaced and neglected in Sabah has become very real. As expected, their political leaders, whether in the government or in oppositions, must ensure that they do not become step children and neglected in their own homeland is given due priority in their election campaigns. Those who do not show or make efforts to prevent it, may they be local or national politicians or of the same ethnicity or differently, surely will not be supported. To allay this fear and to show that the government is sensitive to their concern, on 1 June 2012, Prime Minister Najib Razak announced that the federal government had agreed to set up the Royal Commission of Inquiry or better known as RCI. The RCI began its public hearings on 14 January 2013.

However, political commentators, especially those aligned to the oppositions have declared that the RCI appears to be a knee-jerk reaction to the defection of several prominent Sabahans BN politicians, who resigned in protest because of the federal government's reluctance to deal with Sabah's immigration problems. Further, political commentators have noted that it is just a campaign gimmick with its outcome not resolving the issue at all. Whatever, hope is still high that the RCI will help resolve the legal and illegal immigrants' problem and its abuse to maintain or gain political victories. About 60% of the Kiulu respondents believe in it. Thus, if it helps to resolve this illegal immigrants issue than BN will surely gain more support and probably

halted the Dusun Tsunami.

## **Sabah Religious Development and Its Political Implications**

Religion is a crucial political issue and tool in Sabah political parties' progress or demise. This is especially with regard to the Muslim based political parties like USNO (now defunct) and UMNO, who leads the Barisan Nasional coalition not only in Sabah but also other states in Malaysia with the exception of Sarawak. Also, UMNO heads the Barisan Nasional Government at the Federal level gives credence to the allegation that it is boosting Muslim populations in Sabah for the purpose of strengthening UMNO survival and supremacy in Malaysia. Since becoming a party to the formation of Malaysia in 1963, Sabah has undergone a significant change in its religious composition. This is particularly in the percentage of its Muslim population. Sabah 1960 Census showed the percentage of Muslims was 37.9%, 33.3% - animism or traditional religions, Christians - 16.6%, while the remaining 12.2% of the population can include Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Hinduism (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010).

However, for the 2010 Census on Sabah religious composition showed Islam at 65.4% or 2,096,153, Christian at 26.6% or 853,726, Buddhist at 6.1% 194,428, and the rest include Hindu, Confucianism, Taoism, unknown religion and non-religious (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010).

The data revealed that animism category of the 1960 Census showing 33.3% were not used for the 2010 Census. It was eliminated and instead the term Hindu, Confucianism, Taoism was used. Clearly, it manifested that less natives are practicing their traditional religions; instead many would have become Muslims and Christians if not Buddhists or Confucianism/Taoism or simply non-religious. It can be concluded that Sabah truly enjoyed religious freedom in Malaysia just like in the other Malaysian states. However, it must also be noted that according to the Federal Constitution it is an offence to convert Muslims into any other religion in Malaysia. As a religion, Islam has the most increased of followers, jumping from 37.9% in 1960 to 65.4% in 2010.

Many reasons can be given for this big increase. First, even though Malaysia is not an Islamic state, its Federal Constitution states that it is the religion of the Federation. In 1973, USNO under Tun Mustapha bin Datu Harun as the leading ruling political parties amended the Sabah Constitution to make Islam the State religion. Secondly, it is due to the very active, if not aggressive promotion of Islam in Sabah. This is especially so when USNO's Tun Mustapha was the Chief Minister. He formed United Sabah Islamic Association or USIA to conduct a campaign of Islamisation and infusing Islamic values into government administration and civil services with the Federal government assistance. Islamic religious institutions were generally



better funded. It can also be concluded that under the prevailing political environment to some it is more beneficial to be a Muslim than converting to other religion. However, it must also be noted that today Islam is one of the fastest growing religions globally and in Sabah the conversion to Islam is still high, now the majority is by marriage.

However, the earlier overly active promotion of Islam in Sabah created a negative image of Islam and the State. Allegations include: rewards and office positions were offered to entice indigenous converts to Islam; people who opposed Islamisation were considered "extremist or deviant"; some were detained under the Internal Security Act; Christian missionaries were expelled from Sabah to reduce Christian proselytizing of indigenous Sabahans, etc. In the same vein, Muslims politicians and administrators have also alleged that the British colonialist have perpetrated similar act when they were ruling Sabah. In fact, they are Muslims civil servants and scholars who said they were victimised when PBS was Sabah state government. A number claimed they had their scholarships revoked in favour of Christian students. Also, they were given positions below their qualifications while non-Muslims were given higher post. This is despite PBS is mainly seen as an ethnically-based Kadazan-Dusun party claiming itself as a "Malaysian multi-racial party" with political mission striving to safeguard Sabah's autonomy and state rights, promoting democratic principles, economic advancement, human rights, and justice. These allege victims said they do want this to happen again to anybody, especially in Sabah.

However, according to 80% of a hundred social science students interviewed they believed that for those who meddle in the state administration which is considered as subversive acts should be shown the exit. Even though Sabah is considered by many to have the highest level of religious tolerance in Malaysia where families staying under one roof can believe in different religions without problem, when it comes to political expediencies religions is still seen as a good tool to win votes. For example, PAS until now cannot gain a foothold in Sabah despite being a member of PR. This is because Sabahans, especially Christians do not want a strong Muslim party in Sabah that could affect the state high religious tolerant. Thus, when the general or by elections is on, religion can still be used. For example, UMNO is alleged to be keen to expand the Muslim population in Sabah so as to sustain their control over the state. In GE 13, this phenomenon is claimed by PR as spreading to other parts of Malaysia. The Christian natives on the other hand are worried that more indigenous Sabah Muslims are fast increasing in numbers and that the new Sabahans are also mostly Muslims. It was even alleged that Filipino Muslims and other Muslim immigrants from Indonesia and even Pakistan were brought into the state to process thousands of identity cards for Sabah illegal immigrants in the early 1990s to help topple the PBS state government.

Surely, the concern of the Christian natives is legitimate. They should be given due attention by all political parties contesting in Sabah. Not given due consideration it will be a very potent political issue. It will be easily exploited by the unscrupulous politicians, may it be oppositions or ruling parties. In this context that BN parties felt safe in the Muslim dominant constituencies and unsafe in the Christian constituencies. The result of the GE 13 almost reflects the truth of this feeling where nearly all the BN victories are in the Muslim majority constituencies and almost all the PR wins are in the Christian dominant areas.

Here it must also be noted that the local indigenous parties in the BN make extra effort to win Christian votes. For example, UPKO secretary-general Datuk Wilfred Madius Tangau who led the implementing committee of Tataba Operation to assist churches in Sabah maintained that the programme was initiated by the three Sabah parties, namely PBS, PBRS and UPKO. Tangau said the RM4.5 million worth of goods, collected through sponsorship would be distributed to 12 churches in Sabah, depending on the needs of the congregation. These churches included Anglican, Roman Catholic, Basel Christian Church, Sidang Injil Borneo, Calvary Charismatic Centre, Sabah Methodist Church, Sabah Evangelical Mission, Protestant Church of Sabah, Grace Chapel, Sabah Baptist Association, Seventh Day Adventist and True Jesus Church (Teoh 2013).

It was also reported that DAP and Keadilan Christian members have penetrated the churches in Sabah to campaign for their party and PR. However, it was further reported that indigenous Sabahans Christians not used to the aggressive and abrasive manners of the peninsular campaigners plus not wanting the churches to be implicated with political struggles were unhappy if not turn off by such approach (Teoh 2013).

## **Profile of Political Parties in Sabah**

The profile of the political parties competing in GE 13 is very interesting. It reflected how the political campaign strategies were formulated to win voters. Let us start with the Barisan Nasional, the ruling coalition before the GE 13. In Sabah, the BN components contesting the GE 13 comprise of United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Parti Gerakan Rakyat (Gerakan), Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO) and Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS). UMNO, MCA and Gerakan are national parties while PBS, PBRS, LDP and UPKO are state political parties. The mixture of national and state political parties gave the BN the edge over the Pakatan Rakyat (PKR, DAP and PAS) which are generally portrayed as political parties from Malaya who are seeking to further colonise Sabah by both BN and the local independent political contestant. However, two of the

opposition winners who won their state seats but lost their federal ones were two former BN heavy weight leaders who formed their own organizations but contested under the PR banner. Both contested in constituencies that they have represented for at least three terms. It showed that they still have clouts over the voters in their constituencies. Nevertheless, both leaders have reduced winning margins compared to their GE 12.

By contrast, indigenous political parties contesting independently in the GE 13 including the SAPP and STAR who were using the eroding Sabah independence issue and other local demands were soundly defeated, with only STAR President winning a state seat. He had previously served this state constituency of Bingkor.

Faring worse, the SAPP which won two parliamentary seats in GE 12 held on March 8, 2008 lost all seats contested, state and federal in the GE 13. This is despite the fact that its president, Yong Teck Lee was once Sabah Chief Minister. He had portrayed himself as a great champion of Sabah rights. Obviously, this image had not helped him to win votes for himself or his party. He should seek the cause of his massive party defeat to remain relevant for the GE 14. For example, it was reported that his “biggest blunder” was declaring support for PR leader Anwar Ibrahim who was leading a federal-based party and thus nullifying his claimed of fighting for Sabah rights and showing his “true colour” (Free Malaysia Today 2013). Yong gate-crashing of a DAP talk session also did not help his cause. It made him look like a thug instead of a statesman who once was Sabah chief minister. Instead DAP gained the mileage. Further, a majority of the opinion leaders interviewed believed that Anwar’s pandering to both Lajim and Wilfred Bomburing both political warlords and BN turncoats cost PR massive votes. That is, despite both winning their state seats and losing the federal ones.

## **Election Manifestos and Political Promises in Sabah**

All political parties contesting GE 13 in Sabah, including BN and PR used their national election manifestos as their main media to present their viewpoints to their public. Both the two front runners’ manifestos were available in 6 languages: Bahasa Malaysia, English, Chinese, Tamil, Kadasan-dusun and Iban. The two coalitions used their respective manifestos to pledge or commit to a number of actions should they be given the mandate to form the next government. In addition, they released several manifestos tailored to each state specific need. The state manifestos go into greater depth about issues relevant to local voters.

The Sabah BN manifesto complements the federal BN’s ‘Promise of Hope’. It spells out 16 commitments aimed at spurring the socio-economic development in the state. These include uplifting the living standards of local communities as well as bridging the gap between urban and rural development.

Further, it include the federal government's plan to build a 2,300km Pan Borneo Highway stretching from Sematan, Sarawak, to Serudung, Sabah. If completed this program is expected to open up a large tract of land for commercial development while, at the same time, close the gap between the urban and rural population.

The BN Chairperson, Najib further promised that poverty in Sabah could be reduced to three per cent in five years if his coalition was given the mandate after the May 5 polls. Sabah poverty rate stood at 8.1 per cent in 2012 as compared with 19.7 per cent in 2009. This is an essential issue in Sabah as in the 1970s; Sabah was ranked second behind Selangor including Kuala Lumpur as Malaysia richest state. From 2010, Sabah is Malaysia poorest state. GDP growth was 2.4%, the lowest in Malaysia behind Kelantan. The proportion of population living below RM3 per day declined from 30% in 1990 to 20% in 2009. However, Sabah still lags behind other states that have lowered poverty rate significantly from 17% in 1990 to 4% in 2009 (Jannie 8/5/2013). Therefore, to most Sabahans, especially voters in rural areas this is the most important issue for them. Keeping this promise is to ensure success for the next election. Forgetting it means political *hara-kiri*. This is what nearly all voters questioned in rural areas said they wanted most, at the very least basic amenities like roads, bridges, electricity and water. Of course, it would be to BN advantage if they could fulfill more than this basic amenities. All the other issues do not mean much to these rural voters.

Prime Minister Najib promise to add four new items to the BN Akujani manifesto, like a major project to build a new 82km link to connect Kota Kinabalu to Ranau, an alternative route to the district famous for the majestic Mount Kinabalu, Malaysia's first World Heritage Site, a facelift project for Tenom worth RM11 million as well as the construction of two halls for SM Ken Hwa and SMK Gunsanad in Keningau are most welcome by Sabahans. Criticism against the BN manifesto include it does not address the "cabotage policy", no clear policy on how BN is reducing the prices of goods especially people are burdened with high and especially uneven prices of rice, as compared to west Malaysia. The high prices of goods have been very unfair and burden to the people especially in the rural areas for the past 20 years Jannie 8/5/2913.

Pakatan Rakyat (PR) campaign manifesto for Sabah contain similar promises which include setting second level national oil companies, to increase oil royalty up to 20% as well as providing employment and safeguarding Sabah interest. It also includes implementing a mammoth highway project linking Sabah and Sarawak as well as introducing an Anti-Monopoly Commission, National Anti-Corruption Policy and the Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission. Further, Pakatan promised to appoint Sabahans to lead and hold office in government departments in the state, as well as to give priority to the people of Sabah in the federal government to carry out duties

there. Some aspects of Pakatan's Election Manifesto are borrowed from its administrative master plan *Buku Jingga*. The BN criticism against the PR manifesto is that it will drive the country to bankruptcy.

The STAR in Sabah under Jeffrey Kitingan initiated the United Borneo Alliance (UBA) to unite all local parties in Sabah through promoting the 7 Borneo Agendas. These include demands that the Federal Government establish a mechanism to comply with the Malaysia Agreement 1963; particularly on the status of Sabah and Sarawak as equal partners to the Peninsular in terms of Parliamentary, Cabinet and Administrative representation. Demands were also made on the relative autonomy over immigration, citizenship and registration issues. Further, a reaffirmation of the often demanded better share on oil and gas revenue in Sabah.

Similarly, the seven points could have a better impact on the Sabah electorates if the locally based parties like STAR and SAPP were united. Even the PR coalition while supporting the demand was unable to unite with STAR and SAPP. Thus, the BN cleverly used this disunity to their advantage by claiming that the disability of the opposition to unite and achieve consensus shows that they cannot be trusted to administer Sabah. Further, the opposition's disunity clearly split their votes giving great advantage to BN. On the other hand, the BN coalitions took great pains to show that they are fully united and committed to ruling Sabah. The BN claimed Najib's Transformation Program is beginning to bear fruit in Sabah. Further, infighting among BN leaders took back seat with all showing great unity to face the 13 GE.

Similarly, the Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) 13 GE manifesto include to effect change and restore Sabah's rightful position in Malaysia. It will address:

- (i) The spirit of the Malaysia Agreement.
- (ii) Sabah rightful position as equal partners in the Federation of Malaysia
- (iii) Sabah rights and privileges in the choice of our state leaders
- (iv) Sabah control over own resources (SAPP Homepage)

However, the Independent Indigenous political parties of STAR and SAPP campaigns strategies were weakened by accusations that they were actually BN mole to ensure vote splitting so that the BN can retain their power. The SAPP, for example was alleged to have been given RM80 million to contest in all seats. The SAPP President threatened to sue anyone making the allegations. But, the damage was done. The STAR President was accused similarly. This is to discredit them so as to weaken their credibility. Somehow, the STAR President overcame the allegation and manages to win the state seat of Bingkor. His success according to Jeffrey Kitingan was because he had

served the Bingkor constituency well. As Jeffrey had admitted to the Malaysia Today (2013) he was very puzzled as to why his party had lost very badly. He claimed that the PR did well was the result of his campaign. If his claimed was true that could be a reflection on his credibility as a leader.

## **Sabah as Fixed Deposits**

Generally Sabahans were not amused when Prime Minister Najib claimed that Sabah is a BN fixed deposit, meaning the state is a sure win for his party. This is especially so when Sabah is the poorest state in the country. Thus, it became a major weapon for the oppositions to poke fun at BN, and especially Najib. Yet, the Prime Minister hold strong to his belief that Sabah is BN vote bank or fix deposit. He persistently declared that Sabah remains a fixed deposit for the Barisan Nasional.

On claims the opposition has been making inroads into Sabah, Najib said it was a political game by them, orchestrated to draw voters' support in the general election. He reiterated: "I came to Sabah because it is BN's fixed deposit, and like banks, when you keep money, you need to check on them once in a while. He emphasized that however the BN would still have to work hard as the opposition was now stronger than before and that the coalition should not take things for granted" (New Straits Times: 28/4/13).

## **Sabah Security as Campaign Promise**

The Sulu incursion to Sabah just before GE 13 raised pertinent questions about the security and safety of the state. This tragic incident claiming life of Malaysia's security officers as well as the intruders immediately became a political issue despite the fact that it should have united the people as well as the political parties instead of each trying to gain extra dividends or political mileage from it. Predictably, both the ruling parties and the opposition parties started the blaming game. Despite many unanswered questions and the intrusion and violence increasingly becoming a mystery, the BN government showed great sympathy to the victims, both to the people and security officers. It immediately took steps to enhance security as well as improving the economic well-being of the areas affected. Najib said: "People have also witnessed BN's commitment in defending the security and sovereignty of Sabah during the Lahad Datu intrusion in February. ....It has reassured the people of Sabah on where we stand when it comes to protecting them from such threats." (Where is this quote from?) He said strong measures to improve security within the 1,450km long Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE) were boosting the intelligence gathering capabilities of security forces as well as intercepting any intruders. The ESSZONE covers 10 districts from Kudat to Tawau under the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM). It is strongly believed that

the effective handling of this crisis had helped the BN to win voters during the GE 13. Questions were raised by some Sabahans about the lack of sympathy for the fallen security personnel's even though they are just doing their jobs. Conversely, The Opposition seemed slow to show any sympathy to the victims, civilians or security forces for that matter. Even if The opposition has shown great sympathy to the fallen security forces personnel and victims the massive BN public relations machinery make it as insignificant. Making matters worse a PR leader chose to accuse the BN, especially UMNO for masterminding it or it is just UMNO drama. This somehow affected the PR credibility. This was believed by 65% of the Kiulu respondents.

### **Sabahan Songs for Change for the 13 GE**

The battle cry "Ini Kalilah" (Now Is the Time), implying this is the time to change the government, originating from Sabah made popular by opposition parties became an effective campaign slogan even in Peninsular Malaysia. A few political campaign songs bearing the title "Ini Kalilah" in the national and local language, like in the Dusun dialect became popular and effective in winning votes. In fact, the "Ini Kali Lah" songs came in a number of versions in the Dusun language sang by their popular singers and is perceived as influential. These Sabah political campaign songs are still available in the You Tube. Its impact seems obvious as in a number of Dusun constituencies the battle for votes are stiffly contested with oppositions winning a few seats. The BN also tried the songs approach. However, their effectiveness was felt as not as great as by the Opposition. This was believed by 82% of the respondents in Kiulu.

### **Conclusion**

The top reason for the Sabah oppositions defeat was simply because they were no true unity between the PR components, the national based opposition and the two local parties. Their initial cooperation was simply because they were facing a common enemy, the BN.

Secondly, the oppositions' failure was due to conflicting objectives between the PR and the two local parties making a united front to dethrone BN almost impossible, whether at state or federal level. The PR wanted Putrajaya but it also wanted the state seats. The SAPP and STAR wanted the state seats but also some federal seats. When PR wanted to contest in all the state seats it was natural that SAPP and STAR were unhappy. The two local parties have hoped that PR would support them for the state seats. Instead they contested fiercely for both state and federal seats among themselves. Without true unity and trust, the opposition's ambition to capture majority seats in Sabah remained dim. Their disunity and distrust clearly benefitted BN. To most Sabahans it

showed that if the oppositions could not be sincere in their relationships how they could be sincere with the voters.

Thirdly, the PR was also seen as condescending to the SAPP and STAR. It seemed to be dictating the terms of engagement with the two local parties. As such, the two local parties who were claiming to champion Sabah rights were not seen as champions by the people they want to champion, but more as lame ducks. Thus, when the two local parties went separate ways from PR their images as champions have eroded. Consequently, between the two parties they won only one state seat while PR won eleven. For the record, the GE 13, SAPP contested 8 parliamentary seats and lost deposits for all 8 seats. Also, it contested 41 state seats and lost deposits in 37 constituents. The SAPP chief Yong Teck Lee barely avoided losing his deposit by a mere 40 votes. For STAR, it contested 20 parliamentary seats and lost its deposits in 18. As for the state seats, STAR contested in 49 constituencies and losing its deposits in 42 of it. As said, only STAR chief Jeffrey Kitingan won a state seat.

Thus, the constant reminders by prominent local leaders like Tan Sri Simon Sipaun to the oppositions that the only way they could win the state and federal elections in Sabah was only by real unity meaning one to one contest against the BN candidates would never be realized as it had fallen on deaf ears. This is because their differences and attitudes with each other make real unity almost impossible to achieve.

Thus, when differences cannot be compromised and attitudes cannot be changed the possibility to unite under one banner to face a common enemy is extremely hard to fulfill. Without total unity and believe of each other the oppositions can only dream of becoming the state government and more so to capture Putrajaya. All that Lim Kit Siang of DAP can say in his blog after GE 13 was “For Sabah, a lively and strong Opposition presence has now been restored to the Sabah State Assembly after an absence of two decades, with 11 State Assemblymen (DAP 4 and PKR 7) from Pakatan Rakyat and one from Star” (KIT SIANG SPEAKS: Sunday, 9 June 2013, 10:10 am). He claimed there was nothing wrong with the PR campaign strategy in Sabah for the GE13. Lim further added that although PR had not achieved its original target of winning at least one third of the 26 parliamentary seats in Sabah, the state could no longer be considered as BN “fixed deposit”. Lim claimed that a fully united opposition front would have led to BN falling in at least 11 parliamentary and 26 seats (The Malaysian Insider, June 09, 2013). However, as Lim explained his GE 14 strategy no mention was made of trying to work with the two state oppositions. This can be perceived by most Sabahans as the arrogance of the Malayan party behaving arrogantly in Sabah or that the two local parties are now treated as irrelevant or even as a nonentity. As least BN have a number of indigenous parties with them even though UMNO from the Peninsular is seen as the dominant partner.

For BN, its GE 13 campaign strategy promising to bringing further



development to Sabah paid dividends. These include the BN Government Transformation Programme (GTP) to address seven key areas concerning the people, making Malaysia a developed and high-income nation as per its Vision 2020, and the motto of People First, Performance Now as a foundation for the transformation of Malaysia.

Clearly, Sabahans top priority, especially for rural and interior folks they want more development. Particularly, for the basic infrastructures like water supply, electricity, roads, clinics, schools, etc. However, if BN do not keep its promises than the GE 14 will be a great uphill climb. Of the 100 voters' interviewed in Kiulu, 85% said they wanted development. This is for both the young and old. More than 80% of the young said they wanted changes because the development promised to them are so late in coming. So more than 60% said they would vote "Ini Kalilah" or choose PR or the other oppositions, they were STAR and SAPP. The Kiulu state seat result showed BN won only by 44 voters. If the BN winner in this constituency do not manage to fulfill his party promises than he can say *sayonara* to it for the GE 14<sup>th</sup>.

Thus, BN campaign strategy for the GE 14<sup>th</sup> is ensuring that it keep its promises to the voters. Give the voters what have been promised to them and half the battle for the GE 14<sup>th</sup> is already won. All the other issues played up by the oppositions including Sabah rights would not have that significant an impact to win the election when the voters see development in progress. However, BN must also tackle the significant issues like the large number of illegal aliens getting citizenships so easily in a transparent and just manner as well as the state rights to the satisfaction of Sabahans so that it would not persistently remain viable issues for the oppositions to champion.

## Endnotes

1. Interview with Tan Sri Simon Sipaun, a former Sabah State Secretary and Vice Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission or popularly known as SUHAKAM , 12 June 2013.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

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