

Aug 2020 No. 6

advisory

IMAN Research

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Based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, IMAN Research (legally registered as PanjiAlam Centre Sdn Bhd) is a think tank which focuses on security and socio-political matters. IMAN Research is spearheaded by experts with extensive local and international experience in the areas of management consultancy, social policy development, community resilience and engagement, particularly in the area of security, electoral reform, participatory urban redevelopment and psycho-social intervention within communities in conflict.

We concentrate in the domains of peace and security, ethnic relations and religious harmony. We aim to deliver sound policy solutions along with implementable action plans with measurable outcomes. To date, we have worked with Malaysian and foreign governments as well as the private sectors and international bodies, such as Google, UNICEF, UNDP and USAID, on issues ranging from security, elections to civil society empowerment.

editorial letter

We are entering an exciting month, September: Sabah will hold state elections on September 26, 2020, and Sabahans and Malaysians are looking at the elections with great eagerness. Last month itself saw Musa Aman, the former Sabah Chief Minister, disputing the dissolution of state legislative assembly by the incumbent Chief Minister and subsequently filing a lawsuit against the state's Governor, TYT Johar Mahiruddin, and to his shock, failed.

In fact, this year itself saw Malaysians reeling from so many political upheavals, even during the MCO when Covid 19 hit the whole world, that we are fed up. Or are we? As Sabah gears for the elections, there is talk among the chattering class that the underdog Pakatan Harapan coalition may make a comeback, and win the purported General Elections in supposedly November this year. But that's either gossip or wishful thinking, no?

Talking about comebacks, Tun Dr Mahathir has made quite a number that he puts Madonna's musical reinventions to shame. Dear readers, have your kepek ubi pedas ready: we are not done yet.

Selamat Hari Merdeka ke 63. Our country needs more than a new government; it needs a lot of love, nurturing and a concrete future.



Dina Zaman

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63rd Merdeka: Still in Search of A Malaysian Identity

IT'S THAT TIME of the year again when we celebrate the nation's history and recall the sacrifices of those who fought for independence. It is a fitting occasion to take pride in what we have accomplished so far, but we also need to recognise the long and arduous road ahead before we can become a truly peaceful, developed and democratic country.

Fate should have it that this year's Merdeka and Malaysia Day celebrations are taking place under highly challenging circumstances. The raging COVID-19 pandemic has stretched the country's resources and overwhelmed frontline workers. The Movement Control Order (MCO) to contain the virus has also compromised businesses and led to thousands of job losses. It has also provided a cover for the government to impose more authoritarian measures, with fresh clampdowns on freedom of expression and the media coming under the spotlight again.

Apart from the economic implications of the pandemic, which are being felt globally, Malaysia is also engulfed in a seemingly endless political turmoil - warring factions are battling for control of the Sabah state government, while at the Federal level, allegiances within the two main political blocs are being traded and tested as calls for a snap general election grow louder. On top of all this, high-profile corruption and crime continue to saddle our society like a plague.

Rather than inspire us to batten down the hatches and band together in solidarity as one people, the current strife has only divided us further. Just a quick comb through social media these days, and one can see deeply polarising narratives playing out among Malaysians. Unlike our forefathers who united against colonial rule and the communist insurgency, we have allowed our political and cultural differences to manifest into hate and intolerance. This has, in turn, impeded all efforts seeking to unite us under one common identity.

In 2016, IMAN embarked on a study to explore notions of identity among young Malay Muslims, and gathered some revealing insights. Today's Malay Muslim youth feel disempowered and lack a sense of identity'; they can be generally ignorant of "others" within their community; they are politically disillusioned; and perhaps quite shockingly, they

possess a utopian view of an Islamic state. This is just one (albeit a broad) segment of society, but it is quite likely that if the study is replicated on other races and religions in Malaysia, it would yield similar themes.

At a crossroads: Malaysian identity

Four years on from that study, we still wonder: what does it mean to be truly Malaysian? Ask any average person on the street, and chances are their definition would be tinted by an ethnic or religious lens. Discussions and debates rage on about what constitutes a common identity, as each segment of society applies its own criteria and ideals to this seemingly utopian dream. But have we at least come close? The realities on the ground paint a complex picture.

The current Perikatan Nasional (PN) Federal government consists mainly of Malay-Bumiputras who have rallied the support of conservative Malays. This is an actualisation of the Malay narrative on national identity - a Malay-dominated government, with policies favouring the Malays, and a Malay-centric culture overshadowing that of other races. Similarly, this particular group's consistent views of DAP as a threat to Malay identity intensified following Pakatan Harapan's (PH) ascent to power in 2018. Such fears ultimately boiled over and led to the backdoor negotiations (popularly known as the 'Sheraton Move') that resulted in the formation of a new governmental pact. Although the special position of the Malays has been enshrined and preserved under the Constitution, it was not enough to quell the community's suspicions of PH's administration.

In contrast, the PN government's rule so far has undermined the presence and identity of other races in Malaysia. The handful of ministerial portfolios allocated to non-Malays and non-Muslims has done little to portray this government as representative of Malaysia's diverse society. We are back to square one, and the ongoing challenge of defining a truly Malaysian identity seems to have reached an impasse. On the one hand, the conservatives are unable to fully assert their Malay-first identities, while the non-Malays have faltered in their quest to promote a more inclusive Malaysian identity. All the while, the spread of globalisation has further blurred

the very concept of national identity.

In essence, it would not be a stretch to say that as long as we are beset with political squabbling and societal divisions, and as long as racism and hate continue to rear their ugly heads, we shall not be able to achieve a common Malaysian identity. More recent attempts to make headway on this have been swiftly scuttled - as evidenced by the pushback against ratifying ICERD and the Rome Statute.

The million dollar question then is, how do we move forward from here? These current challenges present a greater test than ever of our resolve and character in the face of adversity. We could say that our country is at yet another crossroads in its illustrious history, and like our forefathers before us, the responsibility of charting its future course now falls on our shoulders. While divisive forces may currently own the day, there is hope yet that a new generation of peaceful and moderate voices will triumph in the end. There is no better time for that realisation to sink in than on the eve of yet another national day celebration.

MA63 and the Sabahan sentiment

When the Malaysia Agreement of 1963 (MA63) was proclaimed - the amalgamation of Peninsula Malaysia, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak as one federated state - the process and the knowledge on the agreement was known to very few people. This was on 16th September 1963 when the country was still coming of age and democratic ideals were new to most of its inhabitants. The agreement's contents were not open to discussion and debate among regular folk - that power decidedly belonged to the political leaders of the time.

That does change a bit however, particularly over the last few years when the document itself was publicly accessible and widely discussed. The understanding and working knowledge grew amongst advocacy groups. One notable aspect was about how Sabah and Sarawak (including Singapore at the time until 1965) is termed as equal partner to the agreement, unlike how we often perceived it as Sabah and Sarawak requested or co-opted to be with Kuala Lumpur, which was the seat of the Federation of Malaysia, and the centre of all economic and political decisions.

In more recent times, however, this conversation has opened up - Sabahans and Sarawakians have been weighing in on this agreement from different perspectives, and this is possible due to two factors: a) Barisan Nasional government has been in power for the last 62 years and have been maintaining status quo on the discussion about the agreement, and b) the notion that the agreement have enabled and contributed to a growing economy amongst Sabahan and Sarawakian in Borneo through capital investments. Today, despite sizeable natural resources, both states still have abject poverty amongst its population, and that doesn't seem to reflect on the tenets within the agreement.

As the Sabah state election is looming, it would be interesting to observe how and who would be addressing the issues on Malaysia Agreement with the intention of educating the people about the importance of preserving and fulfilling its pledges, instead of weaponizing it to shore up discontent amongst Malaysian citizens after working so hard on keeping it intact and in order. The youth segment in Sabah will be watching this development with keen eyes. Little do we know; they are the actual kingmakers in determining the future of their own state. When we next celebrate Malaysia Day on 16th September, the question on all Sabahans' minds will be: whether the Malaysia Agreement of 1963? ■

APPROACHING SABAH STATE ELECTIONS

Local Parties in the Sabah State Election

Since the official announcement on the date of the State Election by the Election Commission on 17th August, Sabah's political tension has been increasing. The Nomination Day will be on 12th September, Advance Voting will be on 22nd September and the Election Day is set for 26th September.¹ As we speak, people across the political spectrum in Sabah are discussing and hypothesizing on the election.

An attempt by Musa Aman, the former Sabah Chief Minister, to dispute the dissolution of state legislative assembly by the incumbent Chief Minister and subsequently filing a lawsuit against the state's Governor, TYT Johar Mahiruddin², has failed. On 21st of August, the Kota Kinabalu High Court rejected the judicial review, leaving Musa Aman and 32 other assemblymen he led in shock.³

Sabahans are in the phase of witnessing yet another decisive political tussle in the making. Amidst the climate of uncertainties, economic hardships, Sabahans seem eager to go to the polls, advocating their political views, either through rhetorics or provocations.

1 <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2020/08/722164/prn-sabah-pada-26-september>

2 <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/537633>

3 <https://malaysiadateline.com/mahkamah-tolak-saman-musa-pembubaran-dun-sabah-sah/>

To this point, our observations found most political parties are in the phase of strengthening rank and file, bolstering their machineries, as well as negotiating for new possible coalitions. The ‘battleground’ will be intensely fought, as almost every party talks about “new faces of politics”. The presence of local parties may not be so new after all, if it’s not rhetorical, but they are bringing in new strategies and offering interesting narratives.

The combination within the Opposition bloc in this election invites more questions than answers. Are Sabahans prepared to give their mandate to the local parties, despite whether it is led by new or old faces? Are the local parties ready to galvanize a fresher outlook and to be more realistic? These are questions that are being asked by Sabahans leading up to the State Election.

It is also interesting to see how issues related to security vis-à-vis Sabah’s sovereignty are dealt or engaged with, since the issue has been a priority to the population for a long time. The leadership that will bring Sabah forward after the result of the election (whoever they would be), must be elected by the voters, with notable credibility in managing both political organization and the state administration must be firm and not lagging behind when it comes to the security of Sabahans, particularly on the claims of Sabah by external entities.

Local Party Offers

Our previous observation shows that rhetoric used by Warisan during the 14th General Election (GE-14) by the slogan of “Sabah for Sabahan” will not be reused in this state election. However, it seems like this rhetoric will be repackaged into a somehow similar rhetoric of “Sabah Kita Punya”. Though, the opposition block from local political parties seems to avoid sharing the same rhetoric. This kind of rhetoric has already turned stale and old-fashioned as current citizens political needs are different from the ones they have during GE-14. The previous GE-14 offered change through the waves of political

parties. In this current state election, the people are no longer interested in political party waves and focus more on the candidate.

As such, Parti Cinta Sabah (PCS) which was previously led by Datuk Sri Panglima Wilfred M Bumburing and currently led by Datuk Sri Panglima Anifah Aman are among the people who keep on mentioning new faces and new political players in Sabah political arena. DSP Anifah Aman even urges his brother, Tan Sri Musa Aman to withdraw from the political scene and give chances to the new generation to take over Sabah’s government.⁴ Despite all of this, PCS too, avoid using the same political rhetoric previously used by Warisan in GE-14 by ensuring that the one they used are not exactly identical. DSP Anifah Aman, in one of his statements, mentions “... sebagai anak Sabah, sudah tiba masanya untuk kita menentukan nasib kita sendiri.”⁵ Based on our observation, this rhetoric is somehow anti-Malayan party and somehow shows that PCS affirmed their position to oppose local political parties who work together with Malayan Party such as Warisan who works together with Pakatan Harapan Sabah. In another statement, DSP Anifah Aman even mentions that Sabah has been a playground to Malayan political party who has been exploiting Sabah’s wealth.⁶

United Sabah National Organisation (USNO) are offering something different to the people as they are in the process of proposing something that is called as “USNO Baru” (New USNO) and “Rundingan Baru” (New Deal). The appointment of former speaker of Dewan Rakyat, Tan Sri Pandikar Amin Mulia as the general chairman of USNO is a new strength of USNO in their fight for the citizens which is in line with the New Deal that they will offer to the people of Sabah.⁷ Ethnic background of Tan Sri Pandikar Amin Mulia which is from the Iranun ethnic group is also an advantage for USNO to gain strong support from the ethnic of Iranun. Furthermore, Tan Sri Pandikar Amin Mulia as a political figure has often helped and supported the people of Iranun ethnicities in Sabah. USNO is also among the political party in Sabah that will be

4 <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/politik/2020/08/720004/anifah-minta-musa-beri-laluan-generasi-baru-terajui-sabah>

5 <https://malaysiagazette.com/2020/08/16/parti-cinta-sabah-muncul-tepat-pada-masanya/>

6 <https://www.borneotoday.net/anifah-mengaku-parti-malaya-jarah-kekayaan-sabah-selama-ini/>

7 <https://www.pressreader.com/malaysia/utusan-borneo-sabah/20200728/281552293185208>

offering veteran political figure in this state election such as Harris Salleh (former 6th Sabah Chief Minister of Sabah), on top of other figures such as Chong Kah Kiat (former Liberal Democratic Party, LDP), Salleh Said Keruak (former 9th Chief Minister of Sabah), Yong Teck-Lee (President of Sabah Progressive Party, SAPP) and Musa Aman.⁸

USNO is also one of the political parties who will mention the issue of Malaysian Agreement 1963 (MA63). The same issue is expected to be mentioned by Homeland Solidarity Party (STAR) which is led by Dr Jeffrey Kittingan. STAR information chief, Jeffrey Kumin states that their president is consistently fighting for the rights of Sabahan, which include the issues of MA63.⁹

Meanwhile, Yong Teck-Lee as the President of SAPP mentions on the issues of Sabah's economic growth, Philippines claims on Sabah and issues associated with the administration of Sabah on his Facebook page. This has shown that he is not rigid when discussing certain polemics that contain provocative and sentiments. However, current observations do not seem to show that SAPP will be competing in the 2020 Sabah state election.

Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) who currently holds four state seats in Kiulu, Kundasang, Tamparuli and Matunggong, also wishes to compete for 30 state seats in the upcoming state election.¹⁰ PBS social media campaign seems to be consistent on fighting against issues that seem to be loopholes that failed to be solved by Warisan, which is on Sabah illegal migrants, as well as on the rights of Sabah and Sarawak which has been exploited by Malaya. They also state that PBS has never been manipulated by a Malayan party, which is different from what happens with Warisan (based on PBS).

These emerging opposition bloc with their own respective new ideas or recycled old ideas does not seem to be able to form a strong and firm opposition coalition. An expected massive clash will happen

in this election, not only between the government and opposition block, but also among the same block. This is because even UMNO Sabah camp has been divided into two camps, UMNO Bung Mokhtar Radin and UMNO Rahman Dahlan due to the decision to appoint Bung Mokhtar Radin as the leader of UMNO machinery for the current election which has been largely opposed.¹¹

Facing Security Issue in Sabah

Sabah is consistently enhancing its security measures, especially its waters. This is further proven by the creation of a Control Centre and a WhatsApp channel, created by Sabah's Marine Operations Force (PPM) Division 4, to improve monitoring.¹² The Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) is also consistent in monitoring border-crime and smuggling activities in Sabah's waters, and in extending the curfew in select areas of the ESSZONE.¹³ In fact, the issue of The Philippines claim on Sabah had died down, although Sabah will always need to be aware and vigilant towards any claims, for the sake of its own stability.

Therefore, the political crisis in Sabah needs to end fast. The ongoing political conflict can jeopardize unity among Sabahans in facing security issues. Sabah's waters continue to face threats of weapons¹⁴ as well as humans smuggling from neighboring states.¹⁵ Attempts to smuggle PATIs through rat lanes are still active, and so far our security forces have been successful in intercepting them.

Our observations have shown that political leaders and election candidates need to be more vocal in advocating security issues in Sabah. These are exceptionally important issues that need to be addressed immediately. Delaying it will leave Sabah open to bigger problems, and a possible repeat of incursion and kidnappings of locals and tourists. These are not only an immense danger towards safety and security, but also a huge risk that can be detrimental to Sabah's economy. ■

8 <https://www.sabahpost.net/2020/08/22/bekas-pemimpin-sasar-tempat-dalam-prn-sabah/>

9 <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-politik/sabah-memilih-star-konsisten-menangi-hati-rakyat-sabah-255075>

10 <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-politik/sabah-memilih-pbs-janji-saingan-sengit-dengan-30-kerusi-253943>

11 <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2020/08/722606/umno-sabah-bantah-bung-mokhtar-ketuai-prn-sabah>

12 <https://www.sabahnewstoday.com/ppm-sabah-lancar-saluran-whatsapp-untuk-pemantauan-perairan/>

13 <https://www.bernama.com/bm/news.php?id=1870949>

14 <https://www.sabahpost.net/2020/08/13/13-pati-filipina-ditahan-senjata-dirampas/>

15 https://www.borneotoday.net/lapan-pati-ditahan-tentera-di-serudong-kalabakan/?fbclid=IwAR3l_0Nd2gf70GAKkXBTW7LJaPdUj6Z6dDBUxzZlloHP-puczsr671QOLx3k



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