

Sabah braces for a rocky election as political parties wrangle and COVID-19 cases surge

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The Court of Appeal's recent dismissal of Tan Sri Musa Aman's challenge against the dissolution of the Sabah legislative assembly has set the stage for a close and bitter election in Malaysia's most eastern state. Following the Appellate court's verdict, the Election Commission (EC) officially declared the state administration dissolved, with fresh elections set for September 26. This is preceded by a two-week campaign period which officially began last Saturday, following the Nomination process that took place in a relatively calm and orderly manner — amidst soaring COVID-19 cases in Sabah. As a result of the increased number of infections, the EC has issued SOPs for COVID-19 prevention involving all stakeholders in this election.

The EC has confirmed that there are 446 confirmed candidates vying for 73 state seats (including several new seats within existing districts). In what is an historic display of participatory democracy in the state, these candidates belong to at least 15 political parties that are contesting either as part of coalitions or independently. Many seats are also seeing multi-cornered fights, leaving voters with plenty of options come polling day. This election will see a total of 1,124,598 eligible voters casting their votes at a total of 741 voting centres — both in rural and urban areas. In terms of voting age, 40% are below 39 years of age and 52% are between the ages of 40 to 69. The remaining 8% are above 70 years of age. Additionally, this election will see a balanced representation in terms of gender, with male voters numbering at 562,505 (50.02%), while female voters stand at 562,093 (49.98%).

Based on early observations conducted by IMAN at several nomination centres, the EC and the police are working closely together to ensure the compliance of SOPs and preventing uncontrolled gathering of supporters, as well as preventing potential confrontations among supporters of political parties and candidates. The increased number of police personnel on duty in the state also indicates that public security remains a top priority during the election period.



In terms of analysing this election and the prospects of contesting parties, our initial assessment is that the formation of a new state government will be a messy, lengthy and cumbersome affair, not least because none of the political parties enjoys commanding support. None of them seem able to win an outright majority, while tensions and disagreements among parties over seat allocations was primarily to blame for the resulting multi-cornered fights in almost all 73 seats contested. All things considered, neither a coalition government of minor parties or a simple majority government (with 37 seats) are a welcoming prospect at this juncture, as this could potentially lead to further political wrangling and party-hopping post-election.

Our observations also found that political parties do not have clear-cut manifestos and policies. If anything, some of these pledges have been recycled from the previous election campaign in 2018. We have yet to discover how the parties will fare without concrete policies, especially in the current pandemic climate, where issues such as unemployment among youths and fresh graduates are rife. There is also the ongoing security threat from external entities, such as from violent extremist groups in the southern Philippines, and statements by certain Filipino officials inciting fresh claims on Sabah's sovereignty. Additionally, the long-standing issue of undocumented migrants (PATI) and refugees will also be among those that take centre stage during campaigning activities this election, not to mention the hotly debated topic of Sabah's status within the Malaysia Agreement of 1963 (MA63).

Recognising these issues as litmus tests for the incoming government, each party is targeting the voters in different ways — including fielding new faces, as opposed to banking on seasoned politicians. The voices of dissent against issues like party hopping are also growing louder, and this needs to be tackled by candidates aiming to win the hearts and minds of voters.

As with any election, IMAN advises caution and vigilance against unscrupulous practices such as vote buying, selective distribution of basic goods and utilities, empty promises of infrastructure and development, and smear campaign tactics, both online and offline. These would undoubtedly exacerbate tensions and further erode the democratic process.

In conclusion, we are of the opinion that the outcome of this election would ultimately depend on the status of COVID-19 cases in the state and the resulting voter turn-out come Sept 26. In recent days, infections have spiked particularly in the eastern region of Sabah, which could affect campaigning and polling activities. Similarly, geographical and climate factors might also impact the election — for instance, in the most rural areas such as the south-west region of Sabah, accessibility to polling centres and safety during travel remains a key concern. Therefore, our assessment is that during this pandemic, the political parties that place extra emphasis on safety and security stand a better chance than those who ignore its implications.