

# SABAH TO FACE SNAP ELECTIONS

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The botched dissolution of the state legislative assembly led by Parti Warisan Sabah is by now inevitable. Following the press conference on 30th July, Shafie Apdal, the Chief Minister of Sabah, who is also the President of Warisan, announced that the dissolution of state legislative assembly has been granted by Tuan Yang Terutama (TYT) Tun Johar Mahiruddin, the state Governor.<sup>1</sup> The Election Commission (EC) in its statement to the media also acknowledged receiving official announcement from Sabah State Legislative Assembly. According to the EC, elections shall be held within 60 days from the date of the dissolution.<sup>2</sup>

The dissolution of the state assembly was a tit-for-tat move by Shafie Apdal, following a declaration by Musa Aman that he has the number to form a government. According to the latter, 33 state assemblymen from 60 state constituencies in Sabah are with him.<sup>3</sup>

The post-14th General Election saw Barisan Nasional and Parti Warisan Sabah (Pakatan Harapan's coalition) each obtained 29 of the State Legislative Assembly seats, while the other two seats were won by Parti Solidariti Rakyat Sabah (STAR) which sided with BN Sabah spearheaded by Musa Aman, with 31 seats. The United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organization which is now called the United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation (UPKO) after rebranding itself recently, has decided to leave the Barisan Nasional pact. Despite that decision, four UPKO assemblymen still showing their support for Musa Aman as the Chief Minister. A day after the General Election concluded, six Barisan Nasional assemblymen quit the party and joined Warisan and supported Shafie Apdal as the Chief Minister on 12th May 2018.

This chronology of Sabah's politics is the primary source of commotions which led to the assembly's dissolution. Sabah will have a statewide election in the next two

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hmetro.com.my/utama/2020/07/605381/tyt-perkenan-pembubaran-dun-sabah-shafie-metrotv>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2020/07/716653/spr-terima-notis-pembubaran-dun-sabah>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2020/07/716142/musa-dakwa-peroleh-majoriti-mudah-bentuk-kerajaan-baharu-sabah>



months. The decision to dissolve the assembly came at the height on COVID-19 pandemic that worries Sabahan due to its impact on their economies. Musa Aman questioned Shafie Apdal on the need to have an election when the former said he already had the majority to form a replacement government.<sup>4</sup>

Security issues, irregular migrants and power struggle within the parties in Sabah — including those who betrayed the trust of electorates — has become yet another frustration for many Sabahans. Katak, a term used for those who switch sides or jump to the other party, is not a new normal in Sabah's politics. The anti-frogging initiative started almost immediately after the dissolution of the state assembly was approved by the Election Commission. Netizens were called to create a name list of representatives who jump ship so that they are no longer given votes or trust to lead a constituency.

In addition to that, the political imbalance was visible due to a weak state opposition, and power domination by Warisan has now become unattainable. It is therefore, the only way forward was to dissolve the assembly and request for a new election, although one would argue on the timing and financial cost to organize an election.

## **POLITICAL GAME AND TURBULENCE**

A few hours after Musa Aman made a claim that he had a “simple majority” to form a government, the names of those defected surfaced on social media platforms. Prior to the announcement, several assemblymen from DAP and Warisan claimed that they were approached by ‘agents’ who offered them monetary rewards and perks should they agree to jump ship.<sup>5</sup>

The phase for strengthening the Opposition pact in Sabah is currently ongoing and lively since Musa Aman is back in the political arena. Musa Aman was acquitted by the High Court on 46 graft and money laundering charges from Sabah's timber concession schemes.<sup>6</sup>

Although Bersatu's entry to Sabah in April 2019<sup>7</sup> once stumbled on Warisan's foot in its own territory, Musa Aman-led political comeback has certainly shaken Warisan's political position. The man's popularity surpassed that of Haji Hajiji of Bersatu Sabah and Bung Mokhtar Radin of UMNO Sabah, whose party is now with the Muafakat Nasional (MN) coalition. However, our observation found the cooperation between UMNO and PAS in Sabah is almost non-existence, unlike at the Federal level in Peninsular Malaysia.

Sabahan electorates are still indecisive about the offer at stake when the new state's Opposition front decided to place their bets on Musa Aman. Sabah has been in constant nightmares under Musa Aman's leadership for 15 years. It took the “Sabah for Sabahan” mantra by a local party — Warisan — to win the 14th General Elections by a slim majority. It seems, however, the “support your local party” or “Sabah for Sabahan” ethos quickly became redundant.

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4 <http://www.astroawani.com/berita-politik/musa-aman-tolak-keputusan-bubar-dun-kerana-bahaya-akan-nyawa-rakyat-sabah-253337>

5 <https://www.borneotoday.net/kediaman-adun-moyog-dan-adun-kapayan-didatangi-ejen-ta-war-lompat-parti/>

6 <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/kes/2020/06/698107/musa-aman-bebas-46-tuduhan>

7 <http://www.dailyexpress.com.my/news/133473/ppbm-bawa-gelombang-baharu-ke-sabah/>



Sabahan electorates continued to check on the Warisan-led government in its dream to return realpolitik back to the hands of the people. Warisan is also faced with disappointed supporters who claim that the party is not showing its true essence in helping the people who voted the party in and its lackadaisical in fulfilling its pledges.

Warisan is still at the phase of strengthening support for its leaders, especially high profile politicians in order to garner votes from multi-ethnic communities such as that of Kadazan-Dusun-Murut-Rungus bloc who were seen as political liability to Warisan after the Kimanis by-election. Supports from KDMR bloc is dwindling following the proposition to implement Pas Sementara Sabah-PSS (Sabah Temporary Pass) at the time by the Federal Government, seen as pawning Sabah's original values, and thus being used by the Opposition, building it on a narrative of fear and loathing, should Warisan adopted the proposal, which was seen as favoring the undocumented migrants (PATI). Due to lack of explanation about the working mechanism of PSS, Warisan decided to put on hold the implementation amid pressure from all corners of Sabah's political spectrum. At the time when the proposed pass was announced, most Sabahan from the coastline of Eastern Sabah were very happy, mainly because they were granted an identity through the IMM13 pass prior to this scheme. The PSS is seen as "better" especially regarding the renewal process, as opposed to IMM13 visitor's pass. The new PSS scheme also requires pass holders to renew at every three years whilst IMM13 would require the holders to renew once a year.

The refugees from the war-torn Southern Philippines arrived in Sabah in the 70's and were granted refugee status under the IMM13 pass, which was recognized by the United Nations. Despite that, the first generation of refugees have settled in Sabah for over four decades and have lived in Sabah up to now with the third generation diaspora. With this phenomenon, Sabah is facing a surge of people who are stateless and with no official documents, making access to healthcare, education and security almost impossible. It was Warisan who proposed PSS with the intention of explaining the working mechanism to the public. However, there was misunderstanding about the proposal which led to displeasure amongst native Sabahan, opening up diatribe amongst the Opposition in Western Sabah.

Meanwhile, political cooperation between Pakatan Harapan partners in Sabah is noticeably fragile. Shafie Apdal is seen as very cordial with the Chairperson of PH Sabah, who is also Sabah PKR's senior leader Christina Liew, while awkward working with Amanah and other PKR representatives. These divisions became apparent following open conflict amongst Pakatan Harapan members at the Federal level, which impacted on the cooperation between PKR Sabah and Warisan. PKR in Sabah felt betrayed when Shafie Apdal was designated as Prime Minister in an attempt to wrest back Putrajaya, replacing the party's de facto leader, Anwar Ibrahim who has now been denied the post three times. There were mixed messages made by the Youth wing of PKR in Sabah who said that Shafie Apdal can be as far as the Chief Minister of Sabah, not as the Prime Minister of Malaysia. This incident has resulted in PKR-Inanam assemblyman, Kenny Chua making a statement referring to Warisan's support for Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister, as a reason he switched



sides supporting former Chief Minister Musa Aman.<sup>8</sup>

The misunderstanding between Amanah, PKR and Warisan was observed during Kimanis by-election in January this year. It was informed that Warisan refused to share information with Amanah and PKR during the campaign period. According to Sabah PKR Youth, Razeef Rakimin, Warisan felt much better being independent than being with PH Sabah.<sup>9</sup> This conflict indicated how weak the coalition government was, and became fodder for the Opposition to attack.

## THE UNPREPARED OPPOSITION COALITION

Bung Mohktar Radin who is currently UMNO Sabah's leader denied his party is involved in an attempt to wrest power to form a new government which led to the dissolution.<sup>10</sup> The leader's statement showed just how Musa Aman's plot was not under the purview of UMNO, and that the plot was amongst the opposition camp within Sabah. From another standpoint, Bersatu Sabah is seen as engaging in psywar with UMNO Sabah when the former announced that it will contest in 45 state seats in the upcoming elections.<sup>11</sup> Haji Hajiji from Bersatu however refuted the claim as ravenous and without the due process of negotiation.<sup>12</sup> Our observation found the rivalry between Bersatu Sabah and UMNO Sabah has been going on for a while. Today, both parties will be tested with the distribution of seats in the State Elections, slated within the next 60 days.

On another note, David Orok of STAR is indicating that the party is planning on contesting in 60 state seats. The party is also adamant on promoting Dr. Jeffry Kitingan as the future Chief Minister of Sabah. They are also very confident with winning majority votes from the Kadazan-Dusun-Murut communities and the Chinese electorates because UMNO Sabah, Bersatu Sabah, UPKO and Warisan are known to secure supports from Muslim-Bumiputera electorates. From another angle, our observation noted that Parti Cinta Sabah (PCS) which is currently being led by Anifah Aman<sup>13</sup> (Musa Aman's brother, and former Foreign Minister in Najib's administration) may get sympathy votes from disgruntled Warisan supporters who are disappointed with the incumbent government and at the same time, wary and suspicious of UMNO. A few Warisan candidates in the last elections are now visibly supporting PCS.

This ongoing situation shows how vulnerable and shaky Musa Aman's ship really is. Although closed-door negotiations are currently taking place, each and every political party in Sabah have their own sets of agenda. Our observation found that Musa Aman's leadership is still frugal, and maintaining status quo within their own rank and file is proven tough. Relationship amongst parties within this pact is scant to say the least, especially that the countdown for the State Elections has started. The weakness of the Opposition pact showed how

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8 <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/537204>

9 <https://www.malaysia-today.net/2020/07/30/shafie-lebih-rela-bebas-dari-bersama-ph-jadi-kenapa-paksa-kata-pemuda-pkr/>

10 <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/536955>

11 <http://www.astroawani.com/berita-politik/bersatu-sabah-sedia-tandingi-45-kerusi-dun-253565>

12 <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/bahasa/2020/08/01/ppbm-jangan-gelojoh-umum-jumlah-kerusi-mahu-ditandingi-kata-umno-sabah/>

13 <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/07/26/anifah-takes-over-as-parti-cinta-sabah-president>



the state elections will be contested by more than three candidates on each state seat. Right now, money politics and racial sentiment are substitute for loyalty and respect for the voters.

### **ANTI-HOPPING PROPAGANDA**

In Sabah's political scene, "frogging" culture is not accidental, as the phenomenon has been known by Sabahan for a long time. This time, however, Warisan is battling its worse political career against frogging, by disseminating paper trails of assemblymen who jumped and accepted offers to be in Musa Aman's camp in order to topple the incumbents. Frogging is a connotation that implies all things worst in political terms including hopping to another party.

Our observation found that the anti-hopping campaign should it stays consistent and organized will have an impact on Musa Aman and his camp for their Achilles' heel is monetary inducement. This is because, for a while Sabah was out of materials to attack and counter-attack within the chamber of parliament. They had to be creative to go all out against their opponents. On social media platforms, a telltale website ([kataksabah.com](http://kataksabah.com))<sup>14</sup> was created, seemingly to expose politicians who jumped to different parties for monetary reasons. This website is currently being shared widely among netizens.

For the incumbent, the biggest test has always been about the recurrence of claims by the Philippines over Sabah's territorial integrity. The recent claim by yet another high profile Philippines politician has given another headache for the Warisan-led government to deal with. This is because, from the onset Warisan as a political party has often been associated with undocumented migrants (PATI), being seen as favoring the undocumented migrants from the Philippines by planning on granting them Pas Sementara Sabah-PSS (Sabah Temporary Pass).

### **SABAHANS APPROACHING STATE ELECTION**

In the era of COVID-19 pandemic, Sabahan electorates are facing rigorous political challenges. The decision to dissolve the State Legislative Assembly is seen as a positive move in winning back people's trust towards their representatives, although it has to be treated very carefully now.

Sabahans are now talking about "new faces not old faces" in determining which party and representatives are their choices in the upcoming state election. The thought process came about following a series of betrayals by the old guards who were often involved in political scandals or originated from corrupt political parties, whether they are in the opposition or the government. A party that can usher "fresh faces" will have the advantage against its opponent. As it is, during a press conference between Warisan, UPKO and PH Sabah, Shafie Apdal opined the need for fresh faces, emphasizing on local candidates of local parties as a priority. Our observation noticed Warisan's calculated move during the 14th General Election, in which they present themselves as a humble local party. It is also likely that the "Sabah for Sabahan" mantra will be mechanized further in this election especially that the distribution of seats will be dominated by Warisan rather than UPKO and PH Sabah.

People are still unapologetic for Musa Aman to be Sabah's Chief Minister once again. Warisan on the other hand has disappointed its own voters for failure in

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14 <https://www.kataksabah.com/>



implementing its manifesto and failed to address issues faced by the people during the harsh COVID-19 season. This attitude has resulted in many of its core supporters frustrated and left out. It's possible the opponent in the election would come from the independent bloc — those who were disappointed with Warisan but at the same time anti-UMNO/BN and those within Musa Aman's grip.

Security issues have also become a worrying trend amongst Sabahan especially with the recent claim that Sabah is part of the Republic of the Philippines, which was claimed by the Foreign Affairs Secretary, Teodoro Locsin Jr. on 27th July 2020 from his official Twitter account.<sup>15</sup> Around February 2019, a similar statement was recorded being mentioned by the Philippines Ambassador to Malaysia, Charles Jose, who insisted that the Philippines claim on Sabah is legitimate.<sup>16</sup> This has caused diplomatic disputes over sovereignty of Sabah between both countries.

This issue became contentious after Nur Misuari, the leader of Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) stated his willingness to help his country to claim Sabah back to the Philippines.<sup>17</sup> The lingering trauma of the Lahad Datu incursion in 2013 is still being faced by Sabahans to this day. The recurring claims on Sabah is an act of war or aggression. According to Sidney Jones, an expert on security in Southeast Asia region, kidnap-for-ransom activities around Sabah's maritime corridor will see an increase. This assessment is also supported by Ali Fauzi (one of the founders of Moro Islamic Liberation Front — MILF), who stated that Abu Sayyaf Group is planning on kidnapping spree because they are running low on funds.<sup>18</sup>

From the security point of view, the Eastern Sabah coastal line is extremely exposed to security breach such as kidnap for ransom activities compared to it's Western shorelines. Kidnapping cases from 2014 until now mostly occurred in the east of Sabah, particularly Lahad Datu, Semporna, Sandakan and Kinabatangan areas. This has now become a serious livelihood threat for coastal fishermen and other sea-related economic activities, although the dusk-to-dawn curfew in ESSZONE-designated districts are facilitated by the ESSCOM. The smuggling of drugs — syabu and goods by syndicates in Sabah continue to make headlines on the news. These are added annoyances Sabahan would be facing, and it would certainly be the highlights of the election campaign.

*Translated from Sabah Menuju PRN 2020 by Tadzrul Adha.*

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15 <https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/94793/BERITA/Nasional/Tuntutan-Filipina-terhadap-Sabah-tidak-perlu-dilayan>

16 <https://www.borneotoday.net/filipina-kekal-pendirian-tuntut-sabah-duta-filipina/>

17 <https://www.borneodailybulletin.com/mnlf-helping-in-sabah-claim/>

18 [https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesian/kidnapping-concerns-07292020173007.html?fbclid=IwAR0Q29n7UiR\\_Msj3-Dg6IZIAdxVq3aICM6PLJ4Q2zsiY5UOibPkiTOMPhfg](https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesian/kidnapping-concerns-07292020173007.html?fbclid=IwAR0Q29n7UiR_Msj3-Dg6IZIAdxVq3aICM6PLJ4Q2zsiY5UOibPkiTOMPhfg)