

2020 Sabah State Election

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The two-week campaigning period is almost at an end, in what has been dubbed the most contentious and challenging state election yet — partly because of ballooning COVID-19 infections in Sabah, and the game of musical chairs as a whopping 447 candidates vie for just 73 state legislative seats.

As of Sept 22, the Election Commission (EC) has successfully administered the advance voting process, involving 16,877 eligible voters that include 7,487 armed forces personnel and 9,390 police officers across 55 polling centres in the state. In compliance with the strict mandatory SOPs set forth by the Ministry of Health (MoH), the advance voter turnout eventually stood at 76%.

Come Sept 26, the contesting parties or coalitions must win at least 37 seats in order to form a simple majority government — a tall order for the 15 local and national parties, not to mention independent candidates who are all pitted against each other in multiple multi-cornered fights. Sabah arrived at this juncture thanks to forces that were in motion as early as February this year, when the Sheraton Move tilted the balance of power at the Federal level, with repercussions for its East Malaysian counterparts. The snap state election subsequently came about after two opposing coalitions — one led by ex-chief minister Tan Sri Musa Aman and the other by his successor and incumbent Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal — claimed they had the numbers to form a government back in July. This forced the latter to dissolve the state assembly, triggering current events.

The political parties in Sabah have been campaigning in full swing since nomination day, although activities have obviously been scaled down due to the pandemic. As per MoH's guidelines, candidates have refrained from campaigning in public areas, while interactions with supporters have been confined to walkabouts and small gatherings. Unlike the 2018 general election, party banners and other



paraphernalia are also not as visible. However, observers on the ground did witness candidates using slogans and statements that were rather divisive and inflammatory, with some bordering on tacit racism.

Based on field observations by IMAN during the campaign period, the following are some noteworthy findings that indicate a fluid and rapidly evolving situation on the ground, particularly regarding the security and safety of Sabahan electorates in the next few days. This is largely attributed to the current measures imposed by the EC vis-à-vis the COVID-19 infections, which have seen sharp increases in densely populated areas such as in Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan, Tawau, Lahad Datu and Semporna. These areas have now been declared a red zone (highest level of severity).

1. In this election, Parti Warisan (or Warisan Plus) is on a collision course with its immediate rival, Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS). Both coalitions comprise ad-hoc partnerships involving local and national based parties. The fate of these coalitions at the end of the campaign is anyone's guess. Warisan is of the belief that as Ubah (Change) is no longer marketable in Sabah, they are capable of standing on their own should they win — without the need to latch onto other political entities from the Peninsular.
2. Issues concerning management of the state's welfare and finances by the government and the one before it is being played up on repeat. From the timber concessions to land acquisitions and endemic cronyism amongst politicians, the disgruntled voices are resonating across the state. The campaign period has also illustrated how distrustful politicians can be of their voters, quite the opposite of how democracy should actually work. Political speeches at rallies and door-to-door campaigns often carry racist overtones — the question of one's loyalty towards the land, instead of promoting inclusivity and tolerance. What is severely missing from this campaign period are effective policies.
3. The issue of undocumented migrants and refugees is once again the talk of state, as GRS in particular — which has strongholds in the west coast and the hinterland areas — have been consistent with their anti-PATI campaign and laying the blame on Shafie's government. This is especially the case in Kadazan-Dusun-Murut-Rungus (KDMR) majority areas, where there has been an increase in COVID-19 cases allegedly linked to non-citizen clusters. Meanwhile, in the west coast area, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) allied to Perikatan Nasional (PN) have stoked the anti-PATI narrative with questions of Sabah's sovereignty under Warisan's administration. In the east coast region however, both parties are campaigning on reactivating commercial tourism, uplifting people's welfare, and advancing the state's economy. These parties' decision to field candidates based on ethnicity clearly shows that their main rivalry lies with the DAP, which is a part of Warisan Plus.
4. IMAN's observation also found that PN campaigns are pushing for Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin's continued leadership as can be seen on many billboards sprouting across the state such as the "Abah Kita Bah" as an attempt to see if this manoeuvring works with Sabah's electorates. The



faultline between endorsing Muhyiddin's leadership and placing Sabah under greater Federal jurisdiction will be determined by the outcome of this election.

5. The final stretch of campaigning has also corresponded with an exponential increase in COVID-19 cases in Sabah as several new clusters were identified. With polling day in less than 24 hours, it is still unclear to what extent voter turnout would be affected by the infection rates. If the advance voting percentage (76%) is any indication, the movement restrictions are unlikely to stave off Sabahans from coming out to vote. However, the growing number of COVID-19 red zones pose a serious concern for voters residing in those areas, and could complicate the voting process as SOPs and social distancing measures are implemented. Many voters have also taken to social media to express concerns about the pandemic and calling for the election to be postponed. However, the EC and MoH have called for calm, and stressed that the situation is still manageable.
6. In terms of psychical security, the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) has created four monitoring teams in the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE) as part of its efforts to maintain security and public order during the election period. These teams are located in Kudat, Lahad Datu, Sandakan and Semporna, which is particularly notorious as an entry point for smuggling and kidnap-for-ransom activities, as well as illegal incursion of foreign entities into Sabah. On Sept 20, Sabah Police Commissioner Datuk Hazani Ghazali received information of a planned large-scale intrusion of non-Malaysians from neighbouring countries to create mayhem and disorder on election day. This information had since gone viral and worried Sabahans. However, it was later found to be a false allegation, with ESSCOM chief Datuk Ahmad Fuad Othman issuing a statement to refute the information. As a precautionary measure, both the police and ESSCOM have deployed assets to critical and vantage positions in the state.
7. As far as campaign gaffes and controversies are concerned, former Pakatan Harapan minister Mohamaddin Ketapi was forced to apologise after his statement calling the Lahad Datu intrusion in 2013 a sham. Mohamaddin, who is contesting the Segama (N-61) state seat for Warisan, was caught on video using a 'chicken and dog' analogy to describe how security forces were made to chase out the intruders during the standoff that claimed the lives of several Malaysian security personnel. He went as far as alleging that the incursion was a political ploy by the previous Barisan Nasional government under Datuk Seri Najib Razak to maintain its grip over Sabah. Mohamaddin's remarks were denounced by voters, especially by the security forces and families of the victims. As Warisan chief, Shafie was forced to make a public apology on behalf of the ex-minister. But the damage is done, as the issue has become fodder for rival parties to condemn the incumbent government.



From the above observations, all signs point to growing disillusionment among the Sabahan population towards their elected representatives. The issues that have surfaced on the campaign trail are not new, and have coalesced around themes such as the state's sovereignty, citizenship, its backward economic development despite years of countless Federal promises, and now coupled with the problem of a raging pandemic as well. The coalition that assumes power come Saturday should realise that the old way of doing things is no longer going to work. Under these strenuous circumstances, organic local parties stand a chance to be the kingmaker if any of the two coalitions fail to secure a slim majority. In this election, the electorate wishes to see genuine change for once, and those in power better pray that they are able to deliver.

The full report of IMAN's observation will be available in our Advisory to be released on 30th September.