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**Political Development in Sabah, 1985-2010
Challenges in Malaysian Federalism and Ethnic Politics**

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Political Development in Sabah, 1985-2010: Challenges in Malaysian Federalism and Ethnic Politics

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Introduction

Sabah is one of the thirteen states in the Federation of Malaysia. It was a former British crown colony. Sabah was incorporated into the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 together with Singapore and Sarawak. Singapore, however, was expelled from the Federation in 1965. Prior to the formation of Malaysia and its integration into the new federal State, Sabah – as multi-racial and multi-religious space – did not have official religion and language. According to the Sabah Yearbook of Statistics, Kadazan/Dusuns¹ accounted for 514,400 or 17.97 per cent of Sabah's total population in 2004, closely followed by other bumiputeras² (indigenous people) totalling 421,000 or 14.73 per cent, Bajaus totalled 381,500 or 13.32 per cent, Malays totalled 330,600 or 11.55 per cent, Chinese totalled 277,300 or 9.68 per cent, Muruts totalled 94,000 or 3.28 per cent and other ethnic groups totalled 138,000 or 4.82 per cent.³ Non-Malaysian citizens made up 704,800 or 24.62 per cent of Sabah's total population (Table 1). In terms of religious beliefs, 359,210 or 74.84 per cent of the Kadazan/Dusuns professed Christianity while 303,497 or 100 per cent

¹ The Kadazan and Dusun people come from the same ethnic and linguistic background. However, the majority of the Kadazan people reside in urban areas while the Dusun people are generally associated with the rural areas. Before the Kadazan and Dusun ethnic name was combined to become Kadazan/Dusun, there was a deep animosity between the two groups who wanted to maintain their own ethnic label. The conflict was later solved in 1989 when it was decided that the word Dusun be inserted into the KCA's (Kadazan Cultural Association) name and hence Kadazan/Dusun Cultural Association (KDCA) was born. In 1995, it was also decided that the Kadazan and Dusun language be recognised as one and the same; Kadazan/Dusun. I will therefore use the term Kadazan/Dusun to describe both Kadazan and Dusun people.

² A sanskrit word which means "son of soil".

³ *Yearbook of Statistics 2004*. Sabah: Department of Statistics Malaysia Sabah (Malaysia 2004).

of the Malays were Muslims. Muslim Bajaus accounted for 342,421 or 99.78 per cent as opposed to Christian Bajaus 383 or 0.11 per cent. Other ethnic groups and their religious affiliations are presented in Table 2.

Table 1: Mid-Year Population Estimates By Ethnic Group, Sabah (2004)

| Ethnic Group | Number | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| <i>Malaysian Citizens</i> | | |
| Malay | 330,600 | 11.55 |
| Kadazandusun | 514,400 | 17.97 |
| Bajau | 381,500 | 13.32 |
| Murut | 94,000 | 3.28 |
| <i>Other Bumiputera</i> | 421,700 | 14.73 |
| Chinese | 277,300 | 9.68 |
| Others | 138,000 | 4.82 |
| Sub-Total | 2,157,500 | 75.38 |
| <i>Non-Malaysian Citizens</i> | 704,800 | 24.62 |
| Total Population | 2,862,300 | 100 |

Source: Yearbook of Statistics Sabah (2004)

Table 2: Total Population by Ethnic Group and Religion, Sabah (2000)

| Ethnic Group/Total Population in 2000) | Religion (Number and Percentage) | | | | | | | | |
|---|----------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|
| | Islam | Christian. | Hinduism | Buddhism | Conf. | Tribal | Others | No Religion | Unknown |
| <i>Malaysian Citizen</i> (1,988,661) | | | | | | | | | |
| Malay (303,497) | 303,497 (100) | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Kadazandusun (479,944) | 100,968 (21.03) | 359,210 (74.84) | 67 (0.01) | 2,945 (0.61) | 566 (0.12) | 130 (0.03) | 2,585 (0.54) | 11,846 (2.47) | 1,627 (0.34) |
| Bajau (343,178) | 342,421 (99.78) | 383 (0.11) | 1 (*) | 42 (0.01) | - | - | 5 (0.01) | 244 (0.07) | 82 (0.02) |
| Murut (84,679) | 11,698 (13.81) | 70,054 (82.73) | 10 (0.01) | 268 (0.13) | 27 (0.03) | 11 (0.01) | 1,324 (1.56) | 1,247 (1.47) | 40 (0.05) |
| <i>Other Bumiputera</i> (390,058) | 273,092 (70.01) | 100,776 (25.84) | 48 (0.01) | 6,716 (1.72) | 491 (0.13) | 69 (0.02) | 1,882 (0.48) | 6,039 (1.55) | 945 (0.24) |
| Chinese (262,115) | 8,589 (3.28) | 81,475 (31.08) | 323 (0.12) | 154,119 (58.79) | 9,409 (3.59) | 150 (0.06) | 1,120 (0.43) | 6,163 (2.35) | 767 (0.29) |
| Others (125,190) | 107,782 (86.09) | 14,301 (11.42) | 2,075 (1.66) | 448 (0.36) | 13 (0.01) | 3 (*) | 421 (0.34) | 63 (0.05) | 84 (0.07) |
| Sub-Total | 1,148,047 | 626,199 | 2,524 | 164,538 | 10,506 | 363 | 7,337 | 25,602 | 3,545 |
| <i>Non-Malaysian Citizen</i> (614,824) | 510,238 (82.99) | 98,634 (16.04) | 312 (0.05) | 1,760 (0.29) | 128 (0.02) | 33 (0.01) | 222 (0.04) | 996 (0.16) | 2,501 (0.41) |
| Total | 1,658,285 | 724,833 | 2,836 | 166,298 | 10,634 | 396 | 7,559 | 25,598 | 6,046 |

Source: Yearbook of Statistics Sabah (2004)

Unlike in Peninsular Malaysia, no ethnic group in Sabah was considered as *tuan* (master) and could claim total ownership to the state's resources. Even though political leaders relied on racial and religious overtones to gain support, the people of Sabah appeared to be more interested in fighting for state rights and autonomy. Thus, any attempt to analyse Sabah politics must take into account the ethnic uniqueness of the state. Theoretically, I view Sabah politics in terms of ethnic politics – understood as the contest for political power based on ethnic appeals and sentiments. I also combined this ethnic perspective with a regional argument within the context of federal-state relations and the issues that emerge from it.

In this paper, I argue that even though communal politics in Sabah was evident from 1963, and until 1975, its manifestation was not the same as the one found in Peninsular Malaysia. Communal politics in Sabah was unique and often blurred by the strong regional sentiment shown by its populace. I argue that Sabah reverted to multi-racial politics after the formation of the multi-racial party BERJAYA (*Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah*/Sabah People's United Front) in 1975, which took power from the Muslim-dominated party USNO (United Sabah National Organisation). Multi-racial politics in Sabah continued following the rise of PBS (*Parti Bersatu Sabah*/Sabah United Party) in 1985 and abruptly ended after the party's fall in 1994. I have chosen PBS as a case study in order to examine Sabah politics from the period of 1985 to 2010. Compared to its contemporaries, USNO and BERJAYA, PBS survived the post-Mahathir era and is still playing an important role in Sabah politics. I argue that PBS was the last multi-racial party that ruled Sabah after BERJAYA. Following the fall of PBS, communal politics also became more pronounced and local politics became dominated by the Peninsular-based UMNO (United Malays National Organisation).

Background of Sabah Politics

The early political activities in Sabah centred on the formation of Malaysia. The first party to emerge was UNKO (United National Kadazan Organisation) led by half British and half Kadazan leader Donald Stephens. UNKO did not support the formation of Malaysia and was a staunch defender of regional rights. Then USNO was formed to represent the Muslim people under the leadership of Mustapha Harun, a Suluk/Bajau. USNO opened its membership to the non-Muslims and was a strong supporter of the formation of Malaysia. Chinese leaders formed the Democratic Party and United Party. The two parties merged and became BUNAP (Borneo Utara Party) and later SANAP (Sabah National Party). SANAP later adopted a new name Sabah Chinese Association (SCA) in 1965. The rural Dusun (culturally similar to Kadazan) leaders formed United National Pasok Momogun Organisation (Pasok Momogun) in 1962. Pasok Momogun did not support the formation of Malaysia and wanted the British to remain in Sabah until it was ready for self-rule. UNKO and Pasok merged to become the United Pasok Momogun Kadazan Organisation (UPKO) in 1964.

The first Sabah Government, the 'Alliance Government', consisted of UPKO, USNO, SCA and Sabah Indian Congress (SIC). The SIC represented a small Indian community in Sabah. The government faced its first major crisis following a personal rift between Stephens and Mustapha. Mustapha, while acting as the Head of State (Governor), refused

to support a number of state executive decisions, infuriating Chief Minister Stephens. It appeared that Mustapha was not happy holding a titular position which gave him little power to rule Sabah. Political circumstances, however, sided with USNO following the first direct election in Sabah in 1967. USNO formed a coalition government with SCA and sidelined UPKO. In a surprising move, Stephens dissolved UPKO and urged its members to join USNO en masse. This federal level change in leadership irrevocably affected the course of Sabah politics. Prime Minister Abdul Razak was determined to remove Mustapha, who he regarded as having dangerous secessionist intentions. When Mustapha threatened to pull Sabah out from the Malaysian federation after a number of his personal demands were ignored, Razak gave his blessing for the formation of a multi-racial party, BERJAYA, in order to oust Mustapha once and for all. As expected, BERJAYA won the 1976 state election with a margin of eight seats, defeating USNO and its coalition partner SCA. Stephens was appointed Chief Minister while Harris Salleh was made his deputy. BERJAYA was the first multi-racial party in Sabah. Its membership composition strongly reflected Sabah's multi-racial and multi-religious outlook. BERJAYA's rule, however, only lasted for nine years before it was 'dethroned' by PBS in the unprecedented 1985 state election. Before reviewing the turn of events that led to PBS's rise, it is important to examine the political scenario in Sabah during the remaining years of BERJAYA's rule.

Sabah Politics Prior to PBS's Rise

Stephens's term as Chief Minister was short-lived following an air crash that killed him and other senior Sabah leaders in 1976. After Stephens's death, Harris Salleh took over as Chief Minister of Sabah. Salleh established a cordial relationship with the Federal Government, and while he was committed to maintain Sabah's multi-racial outlook, Harris had no choice but to support Abdul Razak's "Malay Agenda" in Sabah.⁴ Razak was a pro-Malay leader that ousted Abdul Rahman on the basis of strong Malay sentiment.⁵ In order to promote a strong Malay influence in Sabah politics, Harris had to make the Kadazan/Dusuns—who formed the majority ethnic group—look culturally inferior. Although the Kadazan/Dusuns are predominantly Christian, a handful living in rural areas remain animistic in their beliefs. Harris's first move to dilute Kadazan/Dusun influence was to categorise all the indigenous people in Sabah into one ethnic label known as *pribumi* (a Malay word that means indigenous people). The Kadazan/Dusuns were not happy as it not only eradicated their ethnic identity, but it also made them constitutionally inferior vis-à-vis the Malays who were described as *bumiputera* in the Federal Constitution. The *bumiputera* enjoyed substantial privileges in education, employment and economic opportunities. Ignoring the people's complaints and criticisms, Harris ordered the *Pesta Kaamatan* (Kaamatan Festival) —a Kadazan/Dusuns festival— to be renamed *Pesta Rakyat* (People's Festival). A young Kadazan/Dusun leader in Harris's cabinet, Joseph Pairin Kitingan, mounted a challenge to Harris.⁶ Harris took Pairin's challenge seriously and ordered him to resign from BERJAYA. On August 15, 1984, Pairin wrote to the Secretary-General of BERJAYA stating his intention to resign from his government and party posts. However, he wanted to remain as an assemblyman for the Tambunan constituency.⁷ In an

⁴ Interview with Harris Salleh, 14 December, 2007.

⁵ Wain, B., *Malaysian Maverick: Mahathir Mohamad in Turbulent Times* (United Kingdom: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

⁶ Chandran, B., *The Third Mandate* (Kuala Lumpur: Bala Chandran 1986).

⁷ *Asiaweek*, 25 January, 1985, p. 23.

attempt to cast Pairin out completely, Harris sent an undated letter, purportedly signed by Pairin, to declare his Tambunan constituency vacant. Despite challenging the legality of the undated letter, the Tambunan constituency was declared vacant by the Election Commission (EC). Pairin fought to retain his constituency contesting issues such as illegal immigrants, the Islamisation of policy and the federalisation of Sabah to discredit the BERJAYA Government. The results of the by-election were indeed an eye opener: Pairin retained his seat with an increased majority of 3685 votes against BERJAYA's Roger Ongkili who obtained only 637 votes. BERJAYA's defeat was a serious blow to Harris. He "abrogated" Tambunan's status as a district and stopped all financial allocations to develop the area.⁸ Harris was heavily criticised for his "punitive" reaction and "high-handedness", but he defended his move stating that his use of the word "abrogation" had been misinterpreted. Harris also said the idea to abrogate Tambunan was not his but James Ongkili's idea.⁹ Harris's action following BERJAYA's loss in Tambunan not only angered the Kadazan/Dusun population, but also turned Pairin into a folk hero.

PBS's Rise

Pairin did not wait long to form a team with the hope of forming a new party. In the meantime, a large number of people were beginning to sympathise with Pairin. Before the new party could be registered by the ROS (Registrar of Societies), Pairin used the PASOK Party as a temporary political vehicle. While keeping his options open to transform PASOK into an alternative multi-racial party, Pairin did not abandon the idea of forming a new political party altogether. However, Pairin and his supporters knew that to form a new party, they had to obtain the federation's blessing. Pairin conveyed his plan in Kuala Lumpur to Musa Hitam, the Minister of Home Affairs that oversaw party registration. Pairin told Musa to look into his predicament "in the name of justice".¹⁰ Musa, however, had never given any assurance other than promising to "look into the matter".¹¹ Fortunately for Pairin, when the idea to form the new party was mooted, Mahathir Mohamad, who replaced Abdul Razak as Prime Minister, was outside the country. Mahathir was Harris's strong ally who made a promise to "sink and swim" with Pairin. Had Mahathir known Pairin's plan, he would not have approved the new party.¹² Mahathir's absence at the height of the political tension in Sabah forced Musa—who was also the acting Prime Minister—to find a solution to the problem. For Musa, the only viable solution was to listen to the Pairin's grounds for the application and to approve the new party. He also realised that Pairin had been a victim of Harris's political persecution and there was no reason why he should not approve the new party.¹³ After much anticipation, Pairin formed the new party PBS (*Parti Bersatu Sabah*/Sabah United Party) whose constitution was modelled on BERJAYA's. Even though a large number of PBS's members comprised Kadazan/Dusuns, it also had a substantial number of Malay and Chinese supporters. PBS's main objective was "to protect and safeguard the rights and special privileges of the local [Sabahan] *bumiputera* and the legitimate interests of other Malaysian citizens in Sabah". In just a short time span, PBS's popularity soared among

⁸ Tan, C. K., *Sabah: A Triumph for Democracy* (Selangor: Pelanduk Publications, 1986).

⁹ Interview with Harris Salleh, 4 December, 2007.

¹⁰ Interview with Joseph Pairin Kitingan, 21 November, 2007.

¹¹ Interview with Yunuf Maringking, 24 November, 2006.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Interview Maximus Ongkili, 3 November, 2007 and Jamilah Sulaiman, 4 June, 2007.

Sabahans. Meanwhile, more and more people were beginning to leave BERJAYA. Harris saw this trend as a threat to his political survival and April 1985 called a snap election. Harris hoped the election would prevent PBS from consolidating its support, but he was wrong, the plan proved to be fatal, with one commentator regarding the move as “political suicide”.¹⁴

The election saw BERJAYA, USNO and PBS each participating in the contest for all 48 constituencies in Sabah. BERJAYA campaigned on development issues and downplayed its main opponents, USNO and PBS.¹⁵ BERJAYA promised to “crush” and “suffocate” USNO and PBS, retaining its position as the ruling party.¹⁶ On paper, it looked very certain that BERJAYA would win. The underdog, PBS, campaigned with an emphasis on BERJAYA's alleged misuse of power and Harris's dictatorial leadership. PBS also claimed that BERJAYA had wanted to dilute the cultural significance of the Kadazan/Dusuns. The main thrust of PBS's manifesto was to “preserve democracy, uphold the law, ensure social justice and peace and provide equal opportunities for all”.¹⁷ Fortunately for PBS, the Muslims and Chinese were beginning to align themselves with the party as they knew BERJAYA would eventually lose power. With the demise of USNO, the Malays no longer had a credible party fighting for their communal interests. Some were also sympathetic to PBS's struggles. True to their billing as “kingmakers” in Sabah politics, the Chinese clearly had no choice but to support PBS as the Chinese-based parties were structurally too weak to represent them.

The results of the 1985 election came as a real surprise to everyone. BERJAYA was completely decimated, having won only six seats compared to PBS 25. Harris even lost his Tenom constituency to a political novice, Kadoh Agundong, a Murut. Other senior BERJAYA leaders who lost were Suffian Koroh, Rahimah Stephens, Ayub Aman, Clarence Mansul and Lim Guan Sing – all were ministers in Harris's cabinet. For Harris, BERJAYA's loss was unbelievable and he was not willing to give up power so easily. Harris persuaded USNO to form a pact. Musa, however, declined to endorse the BERJAYA-USNO coalition.¹⁸ Ignoring Musa, Harris pressed ahead with the plan to form a coalition government with USNO which won a substantial number of seats in Muslim-majority constituencies. Mustapha was appointed as Chief Minister in a highly controversial swearing-in ceremony. However, within 15 hours, Musa revoked Mustapha's appointment and ordered Pairin to be appointed as Chief Minister. Harris blamed Kadazan/Dusun ethnic sentiment as the major factor that caused BERJAYA's downfall, and he was right. BERJAYA lost in almost all Kadazan/Dusun-majority constituencies while PBS re-affirmed its support among the largest ethnic group in Sabah. Apart from the Kadazan/Dusun ethnic sentiment, BERJAYA also lost due to its pro-federation policies that angered most Sabahans; the handing over of Labuan to the Federal Government and its failure to solve the perennial issue of illegal immigrants from the Southern Philippines, are two prime examples. For Harris, BERJAYA's defeat was primarily caused by “sentiments, emotions, anger and jealousy”.¹⁹

¹⁴ Loh, K. W. (1986). “Sabah: a Threat to Our Democracy”, *Aliran Monthly* (April/May), p. 2-5.

¹⁵ *Daily Express*, 8 April, 1985.

¹⁶ *Daily Express*, 3 April, 1985 and *The Star*, 23 March, 1985.

¹⁷ *Daily Express*, 9 April, 1985.

¹⁸ *Daily Express*, 25 April, 1985.

¹⁹ *Asiaweek*, 7 June, 1985, p. 44.

Sabah under PBS's Rule

Pairin continued with BERJAYA's legacy of appointing three deputies to the chief minister representing the major ethnic groups in Sabah. Pairin's cabinet reflected the multi-racial character of Sabah society, although he was hoping to see a stronger Muslim representation in his government. PBS did not wait long to dismantle some of the BERJAYA-era policies which angered many Sabahans. PBS released a directive calling for the replacement of the term *pribumi* to *bumiputera* which would place the indigenous people in Sabah at the same level as the Malays in Peninsular Malaysia. Pairin also made a drastic restructuring exercise to the civil service "to improve efficiency".²⁰ He removed the practice of seeking the Village Development and Security Committee's (*Jawatankuasa Keselamatan dan Kemajuan Kampung* or JKKK) approval for land applications, permits for housing construction, trading and firearm licenses, education scholarships, and other related applications. Pairin alleged that JKKK was introduced by BERJAYA as a means of political control rather than a tool to help the people.²¹ Pairin also lifted the ban preventing key opposition figures from entering Sabah. He also restructured MUIS (*Majlis Ugama Islam Sabah/Sabah Islamic Council*) to ensure that missionary works were carried out by qualified officials to prevent forced conversions involving non-Muslims.

The first 15 months of PBS's rule was not an easy one. It was faced with a series of defections and was unable to exert any meaningful influence in the state assembly due to falling short of the two-thirds majority needed to rule in isolation. BERJAYA and USNO continued to argue that Pairin's appointment as Chief Minister was illegal. Mahathir appeared to be unwilling to accept PBS into BN (Barisan Nasional/National Front) as it did not have a strong multi-racial representation.²² Without federal support, PBS's position was hanging in the balance and exposed it to attacks from all fronts. A series of defections forced Pairin to dissolve the state assembly on February 24, 1986. For Pairin, the election was important in order to get "a clear mandate as to who should rule".²³ Following the dissolution of the state assembly, the capital city of Kota Kinabalu was turned into a war zone with unruly mobs damaging public properties and causing disturbances. Mustapha and Harris were blamed for causing the violent demonstration which left five people dead and countless others injured.²⁴ The State Security Council headed by Pairin convened for a meeting and imposed a curfew in Kota Kinabalu and Penampang. Mustapha and Harris were hoping that a state of emergency would be declared and that this would force Pairin to give up power. They knew that they would not win at the ballot box as support for their parties was slowly declining.²⁵ Mahathir offered a solution to the political impasse by introducing a plan known as the Sabah Formula. The so-called formula would see a coalition government comprising of PBS, USNO and BERJAYA. The formula also suggested that Pairin would be retained as Chief Minister and Chairman of Sabah BN. However, it proposed that no election should be conducted in Sabah. USNO and BERJAYA accepted the conditions set in the formula but

²⁰ *Asiaweek*, 17 May, 1985.

²¹ Lim, R., *Federal-State Relations in Sabah, Malaysia: The Berjaya Administration, 1976-1985* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).

²² Loh, K. W. (1986, p. 2-5), *op. cit.*

²³ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 13, 1986, p. 36.

²⁴ Luping, H. (1994). *Sabah's Dilemma: The Political History of Sabah (1960-1994)*. Kuala Lumpur: Magnus Books, p. 411, Tan, C. K. (1986), *op. cit.* and Chandran, B. (1986), *op. cit.*

²⁵ Chandran, B. (1986), *op. cit.*

PBS insisted on holding an election to ensure the legitimacy of the government. PBS also wanted the State Constitution amended in order to declare party defection illegal. USNO and BERJAYA, however, rejected PBS's proposals. After receiving a strong opposition within its ranks, PBS had no choice but to abandon the formula and to withdraw its application to join BN. It came up with another counter-proposal which Mahathir considered as "one-sided" and "placed too much priority on self-interest".²⁶

The state election of 1986 proceeded despite the attempts to stop it. PBS fielded 47 candidates, BERJAYA 37, USNO 27, PCS (*Parti Cina Sabah/Sabah Chinese Party*) 7, SCCCPCP (Sabah Chinese Consolidated Party) 6, PASOK 2 and PMS (*Parti Murut Sabah/Sabah Murut Party*) 5. PBS campaigned on issues related to democratic governance and equality in the distribution of economic benefits. USNO and BERJAYA relied on their past performance as former ruling governments. The results of the election proved once more that the multi-racial PBS was widely supported by the electorate. PBS won 34 of 47 seats contested. Overall, PBS managed to obtain 53.1 per cent of the popular vote.²⁷ USNO only secured 12 seats, while BERJAYA and SCCP won just one seat each. All the other contesting parties failed to win any seats. Repeating its performance in the 1985 election, PBS won all the Kadazan/Dusun-majority constituencies. It also managed to increase its Chinese support by winning all except one Chinese-majority constituency. While struggling to consolidate its Muslim support in 1985, PBS now managed to secure increase their support by securing four Muslim-majority constituencies. PBS also managed to make inroads in other key Muslim constituencies, losing only with marginal vote differences. PBS's victory in the election reflected the electorate's acceptance of its multi-racial concept. Having won the 1986 election, PBS consolidated its power by expanding the size of the cabinet and by introducing a law preventing party defection. With the passing of the law, Sabah was the only state in Malaysia with an "anti-hop law" (anti defection law). PBS's next move was to re-submit its application to join BN. After winning a substantial number of Muslim-majority constituencies in the 1986 election, PBS was accepted into BN. For BN, PBS's entry into the national coalition would not only strengthen its position nationally, it would also ensure its strong presence in Sabah. In the July 1986 general election, PBS contributed eight seats to BN in the national parliament.

PBS was synonymous with the struggle to restore state rights and autonomy. One of the key factors that contributed to PBS's rise was its success in arousing regional sentiments. It appeared that a large number of Sabahans wanted PBS to pursue and force the Federal Government to address the issues such as illegal immigrants, immigration policy, regional economic disparity, the under-representation of Sabahans in the civil service and the Twenty Point Agreement. For PBS supporters, failure to bring these issues to the Federal Government's attention would be tantamount to PBS breaking its election promises. The Federal Government stressed that having been incorporated into Malaysia in 1963, Sabah shared an equal status with the other states in the federation and thus should not be treated as "special". PBS, however, insisted on defending its regional stand, causing the Federal Government to regard the party as "anti-federal" and being "disloyal" to Malaysia. PBS's combative approach prompted the Federal Government to come down hard on PBS leaders by making arbitrary corruption charges against them and by

²⁶ *Daily Express*, 7 January, 1986.

²⁷ *Daily Express*, 7 May, 1986.

conducting a series of questionable raids on their homes.²⁸ Jeffery Kitingan, Pairin's younger brother, who was considered as the "principle ideologue" and "theorist" for PBS, was investigated by the Anti Corruption Agency (ACA) and charged with seven counts of corruption.²⁹ Jeffery defended himself by saying the ACA investigation on him was part of the Federal Government's effort to weaken the democratically elected PBS Government.³⁰

Having failed to weaken PBS through a series of questionable legal charges, PBS's opponents turned to the Kadazan/Dusuns to split the party. On February 1989, former BERJAYA vice president James Ongkili formed PRS (*Parti Rakyat Sabah/Sabah People's Party*) in an attempt "to siphon off the Kadazan[Dusuns] votes that made up the majority of the support of the PBS".³¹ In September that same year, PBS deputy president Mark Koding resigned from the party and formed AKAR (*Angkatan Keadilan Rakyat/People's Justice Party*). Koding was the president of the influential USDA (United Sabah Dusun Association) and his resignation was seen as an attempt to persuade Dusun supporters in PBS to leave the party and join AKAR. Koding claimed that the Dusun people were discriminated against and regarded as inferior in comparison to the Kadazans. In an attempt to squash Koding's allegation, Pairin, acting as KCA (Kadazan Cultural Association) president, announced the inclusion of the word Dusun into KCA's name to Kadazan/Dusun Cultural Association (KDCA). Pairin said the inclusion of the word Dusun "heralded a new era for [Sabah's] tribal groups" and would "remove the impression that the KCA belongs to the Kadazan people only".³² Koding regarded Pairin's move as "cosmetic" and "politically motivated".³³ Following Koding's resignation from PBS, a by-election was announced in Ranau. The by-election was important as it would gauge the Kadazans' and Dusuns' attitudes toward the rivalry between Koding and Pairin. The PBS candidate Siringan Gubat won the by-election obtaining 3647 votes against Koding who garnered 2517 votes. The results of the Ranau by-election indicated that the Kadazans and Dusuns were solidly rallying behind PBS and Pairin. Koding's resignation from PBS and his plea for the Dusun people to support USDA failed to turn the tide against PBS in Ranau.

After surviving a series of attempts to dislodge its power, PBS faced another crucial state election in July 1990. The election saw a record of 251 seats being contesting compared to 220 in 1985 and 165 in 1986. PBS and BERJAYA contested in all 48 constituencies followed by USNO 37, PRS 41, AKAR 33, DAP (Democratic Action Party) 7 and LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) 14. PBS used the same old method of campaigning – reminding the voters of the importance of preserving state rights and autonomy. In an about turn, BERJAYA changed its "federal friendly" outlook into an emerging champion of state rights and issues. It promised to increase oil royalty by 100 percent and solve the illegal immigrant problem in Sabah. BERJAYA president Harris Salleh admitted that he was wrong in accepting the various federal policies in Sabah.³⁴ USNO accused PBS of nepotism and favouritism, reminding the voters that the fight against the ruling party was

²⁸ Chandran, B. (1986), op. cit.

²⁹ *Daily Express*, 24 January, 1990.

³⁰ Interview with Jeffery Kitingan, 22 November, 2006.

³¹ Mohd. Agus Yusoff (2006). *Malaysian Federalism: Conflict or Consensus*. Bangi: Penerbit UKM, p. 285.

³² *Daily Express*, 6 November, 1989.

³³ *Daily Express*, 7 November, 1989.

³⁴ *Borneo Mail*, 6 July, 1990.

a *jihad* (holy war).³⁵ The new party PRS promised to establish a more meaningful relation with the Federal Government if it managed to form the government. PBS returned to power with 36 seats.³⁶ Its share of the popular vote also increased from 53.1 per cent in 1986 to 53.22 per cent.³⁷ USNO only managed to win 12 of 38 seats contested. If anything, the election indicated the end of BERJAYA's influence in Sabah. It failed to win any seats and had the highest number of candidates who forfeited their deposits.³⁸ PBS re-affirmed its Kadazan/Dusun support, winning all the Kadazan/Dusun-majority constituencies. The Chinese also renewed their support to PBS by returning all eight PBS assemblymen to power despite the presence of predominantly Chinese-based parties, LDP and DAP. Muslims renewed their support to USNO, even though PBS had previously managed to make inroads in several key Muslim constituencies. In the end it only managed to repeat its 1986 election performance in Muslim majority constituencies. The Federal Government appeared to be wary of PBS's victory and regarded it as "an encroachment of a minority over a majority *Muslim Bumiputera*, PBS looked upon the relationship with them [Federal Government] in quite the opposite terms—as the encroachment of the majority over the minority".³⁹

The final straw that deepened the enmity to breaking point between the Federal Government and PBS came in 1990 when Malaysia preparing to conduct the 1990 general election. During a campaign rally attended by Mahathir, Pairin made a strong remark calling the Federal Government "not to ignore the rights and interests of the Sabah people, so as to maintain stability in administration".⁴⁰ When Pairin failed to receive a convincing response from Mahathir, he made the drastic decision to announce PBS's withdrawal from BN. At the same time, Pairin also announced that PBS would form a pact with *Semangat 46* –a splinter party from UMNO led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah; Mahathir's main opponent in the tussle to helm the national ruling party's leadership. *Semangat 46* was the leading party in the opposition coalition, *Gagasan Rakyat* (People's Coalition). Pairin's action clearly angered Mahathir, especially considering its timing at the eleventh hour of campaigning. Why did Pairin make such a risky move that could bring an end to his political career, and that of PBS's survival? First, Pairin's key allies Yong Teck Lee and Bernard Dompok believed that PBS could deny BN its two-third majority in parliament by teaming up with DAP to wrest the predominantly urban Chinese-majority constituencies in Sabah.⁴¹ Second, Pairin was also made to believe that *Semangat 46* would win the general election and that Tengku Razaleigh would replace Mahathir as Prime Minister. This was based on the assumption that *Gagasan Rakyat* could win over 60 parliamentary seats in Peninsular Malaysia and 20 seats in Sarawak. If another 15 seats were to be won by PBS, *Gagasan Rakyat* would be able to topple BN.⁴² However, the calculation proved to be wrong. BN returned to power with 127 of 180 seats contested while the *Gagasan Rakyat*

³⁵ Luping, H. (1994), op. cit.

³⁶ *Borneo Mail*, 19 July, 1990 and Election Commission of Malaysia (1990). *Sabah State Assembly Election Report*. <http://www.spr.gov.my/laporan/1990/sabahhb.html>. Accessed June 4, 2007.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Borneo Mail*, 18 July, 1990.

³⁹ Mohd. Agus Yusoff (2006), op. cit.

⁴⁰ *Borneo Mail*, 14 October, 1990.

⁴¹ Interview with Jeffrey Kitingan, 22 November, 2007 and Radin Malleh, 11 July, 2007.

⁴² Lim, K. S. (2004). "PBS ill-advised to pull out from the Barisan Nasional (BN) 11 years ago because it believed it could be the "kingmaker" in Malaysian politics in the toppling of Mahathir and the election of Razaleigh as Prime Minister". <http://www.malaysia.net/dap/lks1281.htm>; accessed November 20, 2007.

only retained 49 seats.⁴³ PBS won 14 seats, four of which were formerly held by DAP.⁴⁴ This showed that the predominantly urban Chinese voters were supportive of PBS's withdrawal from BN and that only a local-based party could understand the issues concerning Sabah. One important reason which attributed to the opposition's loss in the election was the manipulation of racial and religious issues. For instance, during a ceremony to welcome Tengku Razaleigh's visit to Sabah, Pairin crowned him with the "sigah", a traditional Kadazan/Dusun headgear. However, Pairin did not realise that the cross-like shape on the *sigah* would be used by his opponents to denigrate Tengku Razaleigh. BN was quick to take advantage of the issue by painting Tengku Razaleigh as a strong supporter of the "Christian" cause in Sabah.⁴⁵ Mahathir said Tengku Razaleigh was set to establish a television station in Sabah in order to propagate Christianity.⁴⁶ The issue damaged Tengku Razaleigh's reputation further when the UMNO-controlled newspaper *Berita Harian* carried a front-paged the heading, "Ku Li Junjung Salib" (Ku Li - Tengku Razaleigh's short name - Exalted a Cross). The spin proved to be highly damaging to *Gagasan Rakyat* as it caused a major swing from the opposition to the ruling party.

The Fall of PBS

Joining the opposition meant that PBS had no choice but to face the wrath of the Federal Government. Pairin was made an outcast and left out of important meetings with the federal leaders. Mahathir did not hide his disappointment with Pairin. He said he only wanted to co-operate with states controlled by BN and that since PBS had rejected the ruling coalition party, it was difficult "to hold talks with PBS".⁴⁷ Pairin was also unceremoniously relieved of his posts as Chairman of the State Action Panel and Chairman of the State Security Council. Financial allocation to Sabah was also substantially reduced. For instance, under the Sixth Malaysia Plan, Sabah received the lowest per capita development allocation among the "lesser developed" states.⁴⁸ Even though the allocation of RM2.307 billion to Sabah marked an increase of RM50 million compared to RM2.253 billion under the previous Malaysia Plan, its "percentage change" of minus 1.8 per cent indicated a significant reduction vis-à-vis the 13 states and the Federal Territory.⁴⁹ The RM2.307 billion made up about 6.45 per cent of the total federal allocation of RM35.757 billion, not including the amount for interstate projects. The per capita was therefore only RM1,683, the lowest among the "lesser developed" states of Perlis (RM2,808), Kedah (RM2,085), Sarawak (RM2,014) and Kelantan (RM1,791).⁵⁰ The "harassment" of PBS leaders also continued. Jeffery, who was earlier charged on corruption charges, was detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for his alleged role in planning to take Sabah out of Malaysia. Ariaah Tengku Ahmad, the PBS Minister of Social Services, was barred from attending a school function at her constituency, following a federal directive issued by the Sabah Director of Education.⁵¹

⁴³ *Borneo Mail*, 22 October, 1990.

⁴⁴ *Borneo Mail*, 22 October, 1990.

⁴⁵ Luping, H. (1994), op. cit.

⁴⁶ *Borneo Mail*, 19 October, 1990.

⁴⁷ *Borneo Mail*, 11 November, 1990.

⁴⁸ Malaysia (2006). *Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006-2010*. Putrajaya: The Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Borneo Mail*, 18 October, 1991.

On February 22, 1991, with USNO's instrumental role, UMNO was officially established as the ruling party in Sabah. However, instead of appointing a Sabahan to head the Sabah UMNO Liason Committee, Mahathir appointed his deputy Ghafar Baba. This was clearly unacceptable to Mustapha and USNO leaders accused UMNO leaders of "breaking their promise".⁵² For Mahathir, appointing a non-Sabahan to head Sabah UMNO was necessary to prevent the jostling for power among the local leaders. The plan to bring UMNO to Sabah was to have all USNO members absorbed into the Malay-based peninsular party. However, due to the anti-hop law, all the aspiring USNO assemblymen had to wait until the end of the state assembly term expired in 1994. Mustapha clearly could not afford to wait. He was the first USNO member who resigned and contested under an UMNO ticket. In the by-election in Usukan constituency, Mustapha won against PBS's Jap Omar, indicating the acceptance of the Muslim community to UMNO. With UMNO's entry, the Muslims found a new political vehicle that could serve their interests. Since USNO and BERJAYA were already politically weak, Mahathir thought it was a high time to bring UMNO to Sabah, ending his reliance on local-based parties to act as his proxies in the state.⁵³ UMNO's next move was to widen its power through the re-drawing of the electoral boundaries. As the EC was closely linked with the Federal Government, PBS's objection to the exercise was ignored.⁵⁴ The predominantly Kadazan/Dusun constituencies of Sook and Lankon, for instance, were dropped in favour of two new Muslim-based constituencies of Sentosa in the Tawau District and Dinawan in Semporna. The exercise forced PBS to compete with UMNO to compete for Muslim support. With the upcoming 1994 state election, PBS was cautious to ensure its position remained unchallenged by UMNO. Thus far, PBS held 36 seats in the state assembly, followed by USNO 11 and UMNO 1. To prevent UMNO from gaining the upper hand, PBS had no choice but to look for a coalition partner. PBS could no longer prevent its members from leaving the party after the Supreme Court ruled that its anti-hop law was unconstitutional and therefore null and void. The timing of the ruling, left little doubt that the Federal Government wanted to see as many crossovers as possible from PBS. After much furore, PBS and USNO finally agreed to form a pact resulting in USNO being expelled from BN and de-registered on August 2, 1993. The coalition resumed with the name PBS-Plus.⁵⁵

On January 11, 1994, Pairin announced the dissolution of the state assembly. This was 17 months earlier before the term of the state assembly expired. Pairin thought the announcement was necessary after all the attempts to bring down the PBS Government. It was also suggested that Pairin's move was a tactic to obtain the sympathy vote from the electorate.⁵⁶ Prior to the election, PBS faced a major setback when Pairin's deputy Yong Teck Lee resigned from PBS. Yong's resignation was caused by a war of words with Pairin who refused to field him as a candidate. Pairin found out that Yong was one of the ring leaders who wanted to remove him as Chief Minister.⁵⁷ Another Chinese leader who was not happy with Pairin was Tham Yip Shim, who was also dropped as a candidate. The fact that Yong was able to form a new party—Sabah United Progressive Party (SAPP)—and that it was accepted into BN in such a short time left him in little doubt that the Federal Government was behind the "secret plan" to split Chinese support in PBS.⁵⁸ After

⁵² *Borneo Mail*, 12 February, 1991.

⁵³ Chin, J., "Going East: UMNO's Entry into Sabah Politics" *Asian Journal of Political Science* Vol. 7 (1999) pp. 20-40.

⁵⁴ *Borneo Mail*, 24 August, 1993.

⁵⁵ *Borneo Mail*, 7 August, 1993.

⁵⁶ Mohd Agus Yusoff (2006), op. cit.

⁵⁷ Luping, H. (1994), op cit.

⁵⁸ *Borneo Mail*, 31 January, 1994.

successfully weakening Chinese support in PBS, the Federal Government turned to Jeffrey Kitingan who was still under the ISA (Internal Security Act) detention. Jeffrey was released unconditionally and was regarded as the key figure who the Federal Government wanted to use to oust Pairin.⁵⁹

The 1994 election saw a close fight between PBS-Plus and Sabah BN, which fielded their candidates in all 48 constituencies. Sabah BN comprised UMNO, AKAR, SAPP and LDP. The image of the PBS-Plus was enhanced with Mustapha's decision to resign from UMNO to support his sons – Badaruddin and Amir Kahar – who contested under the PBS-Plus ticket, in Usukan and Banggi respectively. Mustapha was clearly dissatisfied as he was sidelined by UMNO, after they chose to appoint Sakaran Dandai as Sabah UMNO Liason Committee Chief. Campaigning with the main slogan of "*Sabah Baru*" (New Sabah), BN urged Sabahans to change the present government and promised to improve Sabah's economy by increasing economic growth, providing jobs and alleviating poverty from 33 per cent to zero by 2000.⁶⁰ Mahathir also promised to introduce a rotation system to the chief minister's post that would provide "an equal opportunity [to the major ethnic groups in Sabah] to head the government".⁶¹ PBS was banking on its "Sabah for Sabahans" slogan, promising to provide fair and meaningful "representation of Sabahans from all ethnic groups and religious affiliations in the legislative, executive and administrative branches of the [state government]".⁶² PBS also renewed its call for the Federal Government to provide a more effective strategy to solve the illegal immigrant problem.

PBS won the election with only 25 seats compared to BN's 23 (UMNO 18, SAPP 3, LDP 1 and AKAR 1). With only two seats ahead of BN, PBS was struggling to remain in power. PBS's share of the popular votes had also decreased from 53.22 in 1990 to 49.66. Again, PBS won in all the Kadazan/Dusun constituencies but failed to retain some of the key Muslim areas. Mustapha's backing failed to convince the Muslim voters to vote for the PBS-Plus. UMNO's call for Muslim's in Sabah to support the party in the name of race (Malay) and religion (Islam) appeared to be successful in persuading the Muslim voters. PBS also only won four of seven Chinese constituencies contested. The swing of the Chinese vote to BN was contributed to by two main factors. First, the Chinese were unhappy with PBS's confrontational style in dealing with the Federal Government which affected their business activities. Second, the Chinese were attracted to the promise of having the chief minister's post rotated every two year as this would give the opportunity for a Chinese leader to head the government. PBS's dismal performance did not stop Pairin from seeking an audience with the Head of State to be appointed as Chief Minister. Pairin, however, was made to wait outside the Head of State's palace in an attempt by BN to delay his appointment so that they could entice PBS members to leave the party.⁶³ After almost 36 hours, Pairin was finally appointed for his fourth term.

In an attempt to prevent PBS members from leaving the party, Pairin found an unlikely partner: Mustapha of USNO. Mustapha and a number of USNO leaders decided to join and support PBS. However, they failed to prevent Muslim leaders in PBS from

⁵⁹ Chin, J., "Sabah State Election of 1994: End of Kadazan Unity" *Asian Survey* Vol. 34 (1994) pp. 904-915, and interview with a close aide to Jeffrey Kitingan, June 4, 2010.

⁶⁰ *Daily Express*, 18 January, 1994.

⁶¹ *Borneo Mail*, 2 February, 1994.

⁶² *Daily Express*, 9 February, 1994.

⁶³ Chin, J., op. cit., (1994) p. 912.

leaving the party. The first to ditch PBS was Lajim Ukin, the newly appointed Minister of Culture, then the Youth and Sports Minister, followed by the nominated assemblyman Zaini Isa and Member of Parliament for Kimanis Nurnikman Abdullah. The next to go was Rubin Balang the Assistant Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries. The onus now was on Pairin to ensure that no more PBS leaders left the party. He instructed his key allies to meet with federal leaders in order to work out a solution to end the political stalemate in Sabah. Unfortunately, at the same time, they were given the idea that it would be better for them to abandon PBS altogether and that “whoever came first [to strike a deal with the federal leaders] would be appointed as Chief Minister.⁶⁴ Making matters worse for PBS, Jeffrey Kitingan announced on national television that Pairin would resign. The premature announcement caused more uncertainties in PBS and some of Pairin's key allies were preparing to leave the party, assuming that without Pairin at the helm, PBS would not survive.⁶⁵ After meeting with PBS leaders, Jeffrey offered a “package of solution” to the federal leaders. The package among other things suggested that a “friendly election” be conducted in which 28 seats should go to BN with the rest to PBS. While the federal leaders were receptive to some of the proposals in the package, they refused to allow Pairin to remain as Chief Minister and wanted Jeffrey to replace him instead. Jeffrey, who did not hold any post in PBS, however, was reluctant as he did not have *locus standi* to become Chief Minister. When the new modified package was presented to Pairin, he was clearly unhappy and insisted on conducting a fresh election.⁶⁶ In a desperate move to save PBS, Pairin met with the Head of State, Said Keruak, to obtain his consent to dissolve the state assembly. Said, however, refused to give his consent even though Pairin claimed to have a document that contained Said's consent.

In the meantime, more and more PBS leaders were leaving the party as they were convinced that PBS was on the brink of collapsing. Jeffrey and Joseph Kurup decided to resign from PBS and form a new party — *Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah* (PBRS). Kurup was made president while Jeffrey was appointed as deputy president. A significant number of PBS key leaders also decided to leave the party and join PBRS. The next Kadazan/Dusun key leader to abandon PBS was its deputy president Bernard Dompok who formed *Parti Demokratik Sabah* (PDS). With PBS losing its grip on government, BN submitted a petition to the Head of State. The petition, which was signed by 30 assemblymen, claimed that Pairin had lost majority support in the state assembly.⁶⁷ The petition left the Head of State with no choice but to ask Pairin to resign as Chief Minister. With Pairin's resignation, Sakaran Dandai, the Sabah UMNO Liaison Committee chief, was appointed as Chief Minister on March 18, 1994, ending PBS's nine-year rule in Sabah. PBS now was left with only five assemblymen compared to BN's 32.

PBS's Survival

With the fall of PBS, Sabah politics entered into new era. UMNO became the first non-Sabah party to rule the state and PBS assumed its role as the sole opposition party. Muslims rallied behind UMNO while the Kadazan/Dusuns were represented by AKAR,

⁶⁴ Interview with Joseph Pairin Kitingan, 21 November, 2007 and Yunuf Maringking, 24 November, 2006.

⁶⁵ Interview with Maximus Ongkili, 4 November, 2007.

⁶⁶ Interview with Jeffrey Kitingan, 22 November, 2006.

⁶⁷ *Daily Express*, 17 March, 1994.

PDS, PBRS and PBS. The Kadazan/Dusuns, being the largest ethnic group in Sabah, were clearly disunited following the Federal Government's political manoeuvre to split the Kadazan/Dusun faction within PBS. Despite the attempt to disunite the Kadazan/Dusuns, PBS appeared to be popular among the other indigenous people. The Kadazan/Dusun support in PBS was further bolstered, following the KDCA's decision to combine the Kadazan and Dusun language into Kadazandusun.⁶⁸ The KDCA also included the Bisaya ethnic tribe into the Kadazan/Dusun ethnic label, raising the number of ethnic groups known as Kadazan/Dusun to 40.⁶⁹ In the 1995 general election, PBS won all the Kadazan/Dusun constituencies while BN almost managed to make a clean sweep in Muslim and Chinese areas. As expected, the key party defectors who triggered the mass defections in PBS failed to retain their seats. Dompok lost in Penampang to a relatively unknown PBS candidate while Jeffrey was defeated by PBS's Maximus Ongkili in Bandau. Pairin called their defeats as "a moral victory [to PBS]" and that they were "sentenced [sic] to their political death".⁷⁰

The Federal Government knew PBS's survival depended upon Kadazan/Dusun support. The re-delineation exercise conducted prior to the 1999 state election was clearly an attempt to dilute Kadazan/Dusun electoral strength. Prior to the re-delineation exercise, there were 18 non-Muslim *Bumiputera* (Kadazan/Dusun) constituencies, followed by 16 Muslim *Bumiputera*, eight Chinese and six mixed ethnic constituencies.⁷¹ Based on a simple majority calculation, PBS could form the government if it won all the Kadazan/Dusun constituencies coupled with a number of Chinese and mixed areas. The re-delineation exercise was carried out to alter the electoral map in order to give UMNO an easy victory in the election and to increase its chances in forming the state government. After the exercise, the number of Muslim constituencies was increased to 26 while the Kadazan/Dusun reduced to 12, Chinese and ethnically mixed were both reduced to five constituencies each.⁷² The results of the 1999 state election clearly showed that electoral votes were made along ethnic and religious lines. PBS won 17 constituencies while Sabah BN 31 (UMNO 24, SAPP 3, PDS 2 and LDP 2). UMNO won all the Muslim areas while PBS retained its Kadazan/Dusun constituencies. The Chinese votes were disproportionately split among SAPP, LDP and PBS. PBS, however, remained popular among the Chinese, polling about 48 percent of the Chinese vote compared to BN's 36 percent.⁷³ The Kadazan/Dusun-based BN parties PDS, AKAR and PBRS failed to wield any influence in Kadazan/Dusun areas. This proved once more that PBS was the main choice for the Kadazan/Dusuns population. In an attempt to secure its Kadazan/Dusun support, PDS changed its name to UPKO (United Pasok Momogun Kadazan/Dusun Organisation). The change in name was to "resurrect" the original UPKO following the merger between UNKO and Pasok at the height of the formation of Malaysia in 1963. UPKO then was formed to represent the interests of the Kadazan/Dusun people. Dompok said UPKO was

⁶⁸ *Borneo Mail*, 12 February, 1995.

⁶⁹ *Borneo Mail*, 13 February, 1995.

⁷⁰ *Borneo Mail*, 26 April, 1995.

⁷¹ Joisin Romut (1999, p. 61) (cited in Lai, Y. M. (2002). *The 1999 Sabah State Elections: A Vote for Continuity, Change, and Development*. Kota Kinabalu, Sabah: Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah).

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Chin, J., "Back to Square One: The 1995 General Election in Sabah and Sarawak", *Borneo Research Bulletin* Vol. 27 (1996) pp. 98-126.

different from PBS and that since PBS was a multi-racial party it could not claim to be the sole representative to the Kadazan/Dusuns.⁷⁴

The first sign of PBS's diminishing influence was its dismal electoral performance in the 1999 general election. UPKO was gradually being accepted by the Kadazan/Dusuns. Its president, Bernard Dompok, who lost in the two previous elections, won this time while PBS's key leaders, such as Maximus Ongkili and Pairin, had their majorities substantially reduced. Apart from the manipulation of the "Three Ms" (money, machinery and media), the use of phantom voters, and the alteration in the electoral boundaries also contributed to BN's victory in the 1999 election.⁷⁵ PBS knew that as long as they remained in the opposition, they would not be able to contribute meaningfully to the development of the state. Moreover, cash-strapped PBS needed funds to develop the Kadazan/Dusun constituencies under its control. Another factor which forced PBS to re-evaluate its stance against the opposition was the increase in the number of Muslims into Sabah following an influx of illegal immigrants from the predominately Muslim Southern Philippines.⁷⁶ PBS was troubled by this surge in the Muslim population, which could outnumber the non-Muslim population and therefore weaken the party's electoral base.⁷⁷ With the re-drawing of the electoral boundaries and PBS's inability to stop the exercise, the party's chances of gaining power were no longer feasible. Therefore, PBS had no choice but to support the ruling government in order to survive. During the PBS Sixth Delegates Conference on 12-13 September 2001, the PBS Supreme Council made a decision to return to BN. On November 15, 2001, Pairin formally submitted PBS's formal application to Mahathir. However, the federal leader who was actually instrumental in bringing PBS back into the national coalition was Mahathir's deputy Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.⁷⁸ On January 23, 2002, PBS was formally accepted back into BN.

Recent Trends and Issues

The 2004 general election was not as tense as in previous elections. Since the general election was conducted together with state elections, the national parliament and state assemblies were dissolved concurrently (except for the state of Sarawak). The 2004 general election would be important to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who had replaced Mahathir as Prime Minister. If the 64 per cent of the popular vote received by BN was any indication, it showed that the electorate was generally receptive to Abdullah's ascension to power. BN also managed to retake the opposition-led Terengganu state and came close of retaining Kelantan. In Sabah, BN managed to win 24 of 25 constituencies contested. BN's performance at the state level was repeated at the national level, winning 59 of 60 constituencies contested.

After the 2004 elections, Abdullah announced the abolishment of the rotation system for the chief minister's post in Sabah. This meant that the door for other parties to lead the

⁷⁴ Interview with Bernard Dompok, 19 October, 2007.

⁷⁵ Loh, K. W., "Electoral Politics in Sabah, 1999: Gerrymandering, "Phantoms", and the 3Ms". In Loh, K. W. and Johan S. (eds), *New Politics In Malaysia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003) pp. 228-252.

⁷⁶ Sadiq, K., "When States Prefer Non-Citizens Over Citizens: Conflict Over Illegal Immigration into Malaysia" *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 49 (2005) pp. 101-122.

⁷⁷ Interview with Maximus Ongkili, 4 November, 2007.

⁷⁸ Interview with Maximus Ongkili, op. cit.

state was closed. It also meant that UMNO had ultimate power to rule Sabah. Dompok was clearly unhappy with the abolishment and suggested that a proper power arrangement system based on a so-called 4:4:2 ratio (an alternate four-years each for a Muslim and non-Muslim representative followed by a two-year post for a Chinese representative) be introduced to replace the old rotation system. Dompok supporters also claimed that the abolishment of the system was unfair to the Kadazan/Dusuns as Dompok did not complete his full two-year term after he lost in the 1999 election. The abolishment of the system had consolidated Sabah UMNO's power, but the reason Abdullah abolished the system was not only due to pressure from Sabah UMNO leaders; he wanted to put a stop to the jostling for the chief minister's position. To add insult to injury, the power arrangement in the state legislative assembly clearly reflected Sabah UMNO's dominance. Sabah UMNO controlled 32 seats followed by PBS's 13, UPKO's 5, SAPP's (Sabah People's Progressive Party) 4, LDP's (Liberal Democratic Party) 3, MCA's (Malaysia Chinese Association) 1, PBRs's (Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah) 1 and 1 seat to an Independent candidate. The deliberate changes in 2003 –also known as gerrymandering– to the electoral boundaries also ensured Sabah UMNO's complete control over local politics.⁷⁹ In 2004, for instance, several new seats were introduced to the advantage of Sabah UMNO in the mainly Malay-Muslim areas. The changes increased Sabah UMNO's seats from 22 in 1999 to 32 in 2004. The second biggest party in the state assembly, PBS, were affected by the changes when the Pensiangan and Sembulan seats it won in 1999 were dropped from the electoral map. The changes also reduced PBS's influence in Muslim areas while at the same time reaffirming its control in Kadazandusun areas. Communal politics appeared to be more pronounced than ever before as bargaining for political power was no longer based on multi-racial appeals but ethno-religious sentiments.

The issue of power sharing and Sabah UMNO's dominance did not end there. Following PBS's 20th Congress, Pairin proposed that a 70:30 formula be implemented in the appointments of community development officers, native chief representatives, district chiefs and village heads. The formula would ensure that PBS would be given priority in the appointment of these "political" posts in a constituency under its control. Joseph Kurup, PBRs's president, made a similar call. He said his party was marginalised as its members were removed from their respective posts and replaced by those of other BN component parties. Pairin mooted the proposal after allegations that Sabah UMNO practiced a winner-takes-all approach in the appointments of the aforementioned posts. Clearly, PBS, being the second largest party in the state was being treated unfairly by its dominant partner, UMNO.⁸⁰ Vocal among those who complained about the lack of political equilibrium in Sabah was PBS vice-president representing the Muslim community, Aliuddin Tahir. Tahir said that the BN Government should not regard the Muslim supporters in PBS as "window dressing" and should include them to "reflect true power sharing".⁸¹ Tahir said if a proper power-sharing formula could not be achieved in Sabah, then the rotation system should be re-instated. Tahir's provocative suggestion did not go well with Pairin who quickly apologised to Chief Minister Musa Aman. Even though Musa gave his assurance that he would consider the proposal, the deputy Prime

⁷⁹ Loh, K.W., 'Electoral Politics in Sabah, 1999: Gerrymandering, "Phantoms", and the 3Ms', in Loh, K. W & Johan S (eds), *New Politics In Malaysia* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2003) pp. 228-252.

⁸⁰ *Daily Express*, September 27, 2009.

⁸¹ *Daily Express*, September 28, 2005.

Minister Najib Razak shot it down saying that it was not “the policy of the BN of Sabah and [federal] BN”.⁸² Apart from receiving a challenge from outside his party, Musa also faced opposition from within his own ranks. This was evident after Musa dropped three prominent local leaders, Salleh Said, Amirkahar Mustapha and Pandikar Amin, as candidates in the 2008 elections. Salleh was a former Chief Minister under the rotation system who headed the influential United Sabah Bajau Organisation (USBO) while Pandikar was a former State Assembly speaker. USBO was seen as a threat to UMNO after its re-branding in August 2006.⁸³ Salleh, Amirkahar and Pandikar were all members of USBO. Sabah UMNO leaders were worried that USBO might replace UMNO as the main party to represent the Muslim community in Sabah. Many believed that the three were dropped as Musa attempted to chip away his opponents influence in Sabah UMNO. The three were known as the “critics of Musa”.⁸⁴ Musa was quick to defuse any dissatisfaction among the state BN component parties through a series of shrewd and skilful political manoeuvres. Many believed that he had a hand in Pandikar’s appointment as Speaker of the *Dewan Rakyat* (House of Representatives).⁸⁵ Said, who lost favour with Musa after he was dropped in the 2008 election, was also appointed as Special Science Adviser to Chief Minister.⁸⁶

As in 2004, the 2008 general election generated little excitement, particularly in Sabah. For Abdullah, however, the election would determine his political survival after being heavily criticised for being an indecisive Prime Minister. The election was also crucial to Abdullah for three specific reasons. First, there was Anwar Ibrahim, the former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance whom Mahathir sacked in 1998. Anwar made a significant comeback into politics after his release from a six-year imprisonment and formed a loose opposition coalition called *Pakatan Rakyat* (People’s Alliance). Failure to contain Anwar’s advances in the predominantly Malay areas would pose a serious problem to Abdullah. Second, there was Mahathir who became Abdullah’s “number one critic” after he attempted to reverse a number of Mahathir-era policies. Third, the election would become a litmus test to Abdullah’s leadership after his failure in tackling high-profile issues such as marginalisation of the Indian and non-Muslim communities, corruption in the civil service, police brutality, judicial independence, economic problems and so on. Abdullah did not give much attention to Sabah because he knew that Sabah BN was politically strong despite attempts by local leaders to bring Peninsular-based PKR (*Parti Keadilan Rakyat*/People’s Justice Party) into the state. BN contested in all constituencies in Sabah. At the parliamentary level, Sabah UMNO contested in 14 seats, UPKO 4, PBS 3, SAPP 2, LDP 1 and PBRS 1 while at the state level, Sabah UMNO fielded 32 candidates, followed by PBS 13, UPKO 6, SAPP 4, LDP 3, MCA 1 and PBRS 1. The results at the national level were as expected: BN lost its two-thirds majority and was defeated in five states, namely Perak, Selangor, Terengganu, Kelantan and Pulau Pinang. BN only managed to win 140 seats with the other 82 going to the opposition. In Sabah, BN won all the 24 of 25 parliamentary seats, while in Sarawak, it won 30 of 31 seats. At the

⁸² *Daily Express*, December 31, 2005.

⁸³ Nasir J. (2006). “Antara USBO, USNO dan UMNO”, *Utusan Online*, 24 November 2006.

http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2006&dt=1124&pub=Utusan_Malaysia&sec=Rencana&pg=re_07.htm; accessed 26 August 2010.

⁸⁴ *Daily Express*, February 24, 2008.

⁸⁵ Email correspondence with a former state BN leader, August 26, 2010.

⁸⁶ *The Star*, January 12, 2010.

state level in Sabah, BN won all 59 seats except for Sri Tanjong. The results at the parliamentary and state constituencies in Sabah clearly reflected BN's electoral strength.

The 2008 election changed the course of Sabah politics. State-federal relations were no longer determined simply by what the federal leaders wanted Sabah to be or what its leaders ought to do. Sabah leaders appeared to have a stronger voice in deciding important political decisions regarding state affairs. This could be seen in a number of instances. In Abdullah's new cabinet line-up after the 2008 election, two senior Sabah UMNO leaders, Anifah Aman and Ghapur Salleh, were appointed as deputy ministers in the federal cabinet. Anifah declined the post as he said he had been a deputy minister for too long and it is about time for a "younger person to hold [the] post".⁸⁷ This was clearly a slap in the face for Abdullah as no one had ever declined a cabinet appointment after it was publicly made.⁸⁸ Eight days after accepting his appointment, Ghapur tendered his resignation as he "[did not] want to be tied up with government duties".⁸⁹ On May 13, 2008, SAPP gave an ultimatum to Abdullah to solve several long-standing issues in Sabah. It even went to the offensive by saying that if Abdullah did not do anything "there [would] be no guarantee that SAPP members [would] remain in [BN]".⁹⁰ Abdullah seemed unperturbed by the threat and this resulted in SAPP proposing a motion of no confidence against him. The proposed motion, however, was called off as it was not fully supported by other BN members of parliament who remained loyal to Abdullah. In what was seen as a face-saving gesture, SAPP withdrew from BN. Why did the "mini revolt" against Abdullah happen within Sabah BN ranks after the 2008 election? Clearly, Anifah and Ghapur were not happy as they did not get a "better deal" from Abdullah despite UMNO's convincing victory in Sabah. SAPP's decision was believed to be motivated by Anwar's deal with Yong Teck Lee of SAPP that "was hatched in Hong Kong and wrapped in Kuala Lumpur".⁹¹ For Abdullah, Yong's decision was nothing more than his failure to "satisfy [the latter's] personal greed".⁹²

With UMNO's entry and PBS's re-admission into BN, Sabah was no longer treated indifferently as far as federal financial allocation was concerned. Under the Ninth Malaysia Plan, federal allocation to Sabah was increased to a whopping 16,908 million (including private financial initiatives).⁹³ Najib Razak, who replaced Abdullah as Prime Minister gave Sabah further political recognition. Following a cabinet reshuffle, Najib appointed Anifah Aman as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Anifah became the first Sabahan to hold the prestigious ministerial post which was normally reserved for a federal leader. Najib also appointed three other Sabah leaders to key ministerial portfolios: PBS deputy president Maximus Ongkili as Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation; UPKO president Bernard Dompok as Minister of Plantation Industries and Commodities; and UMNO vice president Shafie Apdal as Minister of Rural Development. The deputy ministers from Sabah appointed by Najib were PBRs president Joseph Kurup, LDP president V.K. Liew, Abdul Rahim Bakri, Lajim Ukin and Rosnah Abdul Hamid.⁹⁴

⁸⁷ *Bernama*, March 19, 2008.

⁸⁸ *Bernama*, March 19, 2008.

⁸⁹ *The Star*, March 27, 2008.

⁹⁰ *The Star*, May 13, 2008.

⁹¹ *The Star*, June 19, 2008.

⁹² *Bernama*, June 19, 2008.

⁹³ Malaysia (2006), op. cit.

⁹⁴ *Daily Express*, April 10, 2010.

When Najib introduced the “1Malaysia” concept as a means to unite Malaysians after a series of racial and religious clashes, he asked the whole nation to look at Sabah as a model for inter-ethnic relations.⁹⁵ The introduction of the 1Malaysia concept, however, was marred by the government’s decision to ban the use of the word “Allah” (an Arabic word for God) by non-Muslims to refer to their own god(s). Sabah leaders, however, called the government to reverse the decision as Christians in the state have been using the word “Allah” long before Malaysia achieved its independence. The call was also supported by Sabah Muslim leaders who maintained that Muslims do not have problems with Christians using the same word in their worship. Having realised Sabah’s status as a “fixed deposit” for BN, Najib reversed the policy and allowed non-Muslims in Sabah to use the word. On October 19, 2009, Najib announced September 16 as a public holiday to commemorate the formation of Malaysia.⁹⁶ Although, the exact date to celebrate Malaysia’s independence has become a matter of contention. Some people are of the opinion that Malaysia should celebrate August 31 as its national day, as this was the date the country achieved its independence. Others argue that September 16 is more appropriate as Malaysia was formed following the incorporation of Sabah and Sarawak into the federation. Najib’s decision to make September 16 a public holiday and to celebrate it officially was seen as an attempt to appease the regional sentiments propounded by Sabah leaders.

Sabah’s rise to national prominence, however, was characterised by UMNO’s deepening dominance in local politics. This, of course, did not go well with other state BN leaders. The issue of power-sharing once again re-surfaced following the reinstatement of six village heads in a PBS-controlled constituency. The six had been sacked by PBS assemblyman representing the constituency. A state UMNO official said the six were reinstated after Sabah UMNO’s interference. PBS saw this as an attempt to interfere in the party’s internal affair.⁹⁷ The war of words between Sabah UMNO and other state BN parties did not end there. This time Sabah UMNO did not hide its intention to take the Tanjong Kapor constituency from LDP.⁹⁸ Apart from Tanjong Kapor, Sabah UMNO also demanded that the Merotai constituency be returned to the party.⁹⁹ The constituency is now controlled by LDP. Sabah UMNO was also eyeing up the parliamentary seat of Putatan, which is now controlled by UPKO, causing the second largest Kadazan/Dusun-based party in Sabah to accuse Sabah UMNO of “stepping on” smaller parties in the ruling coalition (Sabah BN).¹⁰⁰ All this happened following BN’s preparations to contest in the upcoming elections. Even though Prime Minister Najib warned BN members “to stop making seat distribution an issue”¹⁰¹, the warning seemed to fall on deaf ears. LDP’s dissatisfaction with Sabah UMNO continued after an UMNO-aligned district chief sacked eight community leaders without the knowledge of the LDP assemblyman in the district of Kudat.¹⁰² It appeared that LDP did not choose to attack Musa openly until it was clear that Musa was no longer willing to listen to the party anymore. Initially, Musa was able to contain the dissatisfaction among the state BN parties. He preferred not to interfere in the

⁹⁵ *Daily Express*, May 5, 2009.

⁹⁶ *The Star*, October 2009.

⁹⁷ *FreeMalaysiaToday*, July 22, 2010. <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com>; accessed 30 August 2010.

⁹⁸ *FreeMalaysiaToday*, July 23, 2010. <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com>; accessed 30 August 2010.

⁹⁹ *FreeMalaysiaToday*, July 23, 2010. <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com>; accessed 30 August 2010.

¹⁰⁰ *The Borneo Post*, August 16, 2010. <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com>; accessed 30 August 2010.

¹⁰¹ *FreeMalaysiaToday*, July 23, 2010. <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com>; accessed 30 August 2010.

¹⁰² *FreeMalaysiaToday*, August 2, 2010. <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com>; accessed 30 August 2010.

on-going spat among the state BN parties. The conflict within the Sabah BN came to its high point after LDP broke ranks and declared that it could no longer work with Musa. This came after Musa refused to entertain the LDP deputy president Chin Su Phin's request for him to look into the issue of the party being sidelined by Sabah UMNO.¹⁰³

Conclusion: Implications for Sabah

The formation of Malaysia in 1963 provided the platform for Sabah people to participate in the country's political process. Unlike in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabahans were more inclined to be politically motivated by regional sentiments, than along racial and religious lines. Even though the formation of political parties in 1963 was based on the communal aspirations of Sabah leaders, the people showed little interest in fighting for their own race and religion. Regional issues became an important rallying point for Sabah leaders who demanded more autonomy from the Federal Government. As the first political party in Sabah, UNKO led by Stephens was more concerned about the fate of Sabahans under the new federation. Such concerns were shared by Mustapha who formed USNO a similar political vehicle for the Muslim community. The other political parties followed the same communal path. BERJAYA formed the first multi-racial government. The multi-racial characteristic of the BERJAYA Government was not only reflected in its cabinet composition but also in its policy to promote multiculturalism. However, the multi-cultural fervour of the BERJAYA Government began to decline after its change in federal policy. Indeed, Abdul Razak, who replaced Abdul Rahman as Prime Minister, took the drastic turn to promote the "*bumiputera* agenda", following ethnic clashes in the Peninsular Malaysia.¹⁰⁴ BERJAYA leader Harris had no choice but to subscribe to Razak's *bumiputera* policy. The problem was the policy gave the Malays preferential treatment at the expense of other *bumiputera* ethnic groups. This was the beginning of the end of multi-racial politics in Sabah. Harris's mistake was that he took the "federal directive" in a rather uncritical fashion without evaluating its impact on Sabah's diverse society. The Kadazan/Dusuns, the largest ethnic group in Sabah, were greatly affected and vowed to fight back. Pairin was one of the Kadazan/Dusun leaders who dared to stick his neck out to challenge BERJAYA. The actions taken by Harris to silence his opponents did not work and resulted in his political demise in 1976.

PBS continued with BERJAYA's multi-racial approach. While PBS's regional outlook was well-supported by the people of Sabah, the Federal Government under Mahathir regarded it as an attempt to undermine national unity and the dominance of the majority *bumiputera* Malaysians. Mahathir was determined to topple PBS at the expense of the multi-racial harmony polity constructed by the party. As we have seen in the discussion earlier, the Federal Government used various ways and means to remove the democratically-elected PBS Government. This included allowing UMNO to spread its wings in Sabah and splitting Kadazan/Dusun-Chinese-Muslim unity in PBS. With UMNO's entry into Sabah, Mahathir no longer relied on local proxies to expand federal interests in the state. UMNO's expansion to Sabah also meant that the multi-racial approach to politics was no longer tenable. Prior to UMNO's entry, Muslims, for instance,

¹⁰³ *FreeMalaysiaToday*, 25 August, 2010. <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com>; accessed 30 August 2010.

¹⁰⁴ Kua, K. S., (2007). *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969*. Petaling Jaya, Selangor: SUARAM and Wain, B. (2009), op. cit.

could choose between USNO, BERJAYA and PBS to represent them. Now they have no choice but to support UMNO, after USNO and BERJAYA were de-registered. UMNO was successful in drawing Muslim support in Sabah after campaigning with racial (Malay) and religious (Islam) policies, not to mention its success in manipulating the politics of development. With UMNO's entry into Sabah, PBS lost its Muslim support and in order to survive has had to solely depend on the support of the Kadazan/Dusun. Of the 12 state constituencies currently held by PBS, eight are predominantly Kadazan/Dusun, two are Chinese and only one *bumiputera* Muslim.¹⁰⁵

The 2004 and 2008 general elections changed the course of Sabah politics in that they propelled the state to national prominence. The 2008 election in particular showed that Sabah contributed significantly to BN's overall victory, and without the maintaining political dominance within the state, the national coalition would have collapsed. This accorded Sabah with the status of a "fixed deposit" to BN. However, Sabah's rise to national prominence came with UMNO's deepening dominance in local politics. Other component parties in the state will have no choice but to accept the fact that as long as Sabah UMNO remains politically potent, the landscape of local politics will remain as it is. The issues of state rights, illegal immigrants and autonomy (the "mother of all issues" championed by Sabah leaders), will temporarily be shelved from open discussions. PBS, known as the champion of these issues, has opted to voice out its concerns within BN. The usually combative Pairin has softened his approach as he does not want to be seen as "a wolf in sheep's clothing". Only time will tell how long the "marriage of convenience" between PBS and Sabah UMNO will last. So far, PBS has not shown any indication that it will return to its former political path. It has no choice but to "behave" if it wants to survive. As much as PBS will have to rely on Kadazan/Dusun support to survive, other parties will have no choice but to go back to their own communities to seek political support. A positive aspect of the current political situation in Sabah is that it ensures a massive flow of development funds into the state and is thus helping it to prosper. The drawbacks, however, are: 1. it does not guarantee a sustained multi-racial and multi-religious harmony in Sabah in the long run; and, 2. it will gradually obliterate Sabah's unique multi-racial and multi-religious character.

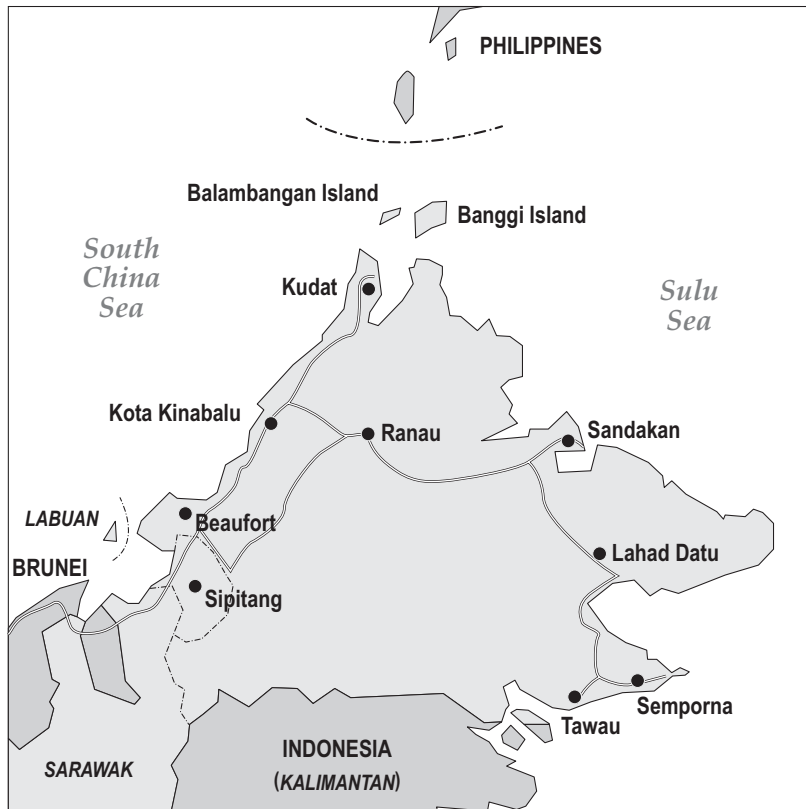
¹⁰⁵ PBS website. <http://www.pbs-sabah.org/>. Accessed 13 September 2010.

Appendix

Malaysia



Sabah





Picture 1: Joseph Pairin Kitingan during the early days of PBS's rule. Pairin was seen as an emerging "Sabah champion" and was hugely popular among the rural people who regarded him as a "folk hero". On Pairin's right is Tengku Ariaah Ahmad, Sabah Minister of Social Services (photograph courtesy of Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS)).



Picture 2: Pairin delivering his welcoming speech in conjunction with the Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad's visit to Sabah. Pairin took the opportunity rearticulate PBS's struggles and urged the Federal Government to restore state rights. When it was Mahathir's turn to give his speech, he said what was important was for the Federal Government to look into the interest of the nation as a whole. PBS leaders regarded Mahathir's response as an affront to Sabah people. Failing to extract any commitment from Mahathir, PBS took a drastic action and withdrew from the national coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) on 15 October 1990.



Picture 3: Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (in black jacket) who replaced Mahathir as Prime Minister was seen as the key figure to influence BN to accept PBS back into the national coalition. Seen here from right to left are Musa Aman (current Sabah Chief Minister), Pairin (who is now Musa's deputy), Chong Kah Kiat (former Sabah Minister of Tourism), Abdullah, and Mohammad Rahmat (former federal Minister of Information).

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