REPORT 5

General Election 2013: Sabah

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This report examines the dynamics of the 2013 elections in Sabah, combining qualitative insights from fieldwork during the election with quantitative analysis of the constituency level results. With little effective opposition in the state since the mid-1990s, Sabah was always unlikely to swing to the opposition during the 2013 General Election (GE13). This report focuses on the strategies used by the opposition in the state. The report argues that while there was a substantial swing in the popular vote away from the BN in the state, the constituency strategies adopted by the opposition coalition do not appear to have been the main factor explaining this swing and, we suggest, these strategies may ultimately have done more long-run damage to the opposition in the state.

The report is organised as follows:

I. The state of play: Sabah before the elections
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I. The state of play: Sabah before the elections

Along with the neighbouring East Malaysian state of Sarawak, Sabah is usually regarded as having very different political dynamics from West Malaysia, arising from a distinctive historical and developmental trajectory and an ethnic make-up that differs markedly from that on West Malaysia with a wide range of small *bumiputera* groups and, in general, greater within-group religious heterogeneity. From an electoral perspective, Sabah can be characterised historically by the predominance of two forces: parochialism and 'big men'. Until relatively recently, national political parties had fared poorly in Sabah to say the

least, with voters preferring state-level parties.[1] Of the national parties, only the Democratic Action Party had any success in Sabah during its first few decades in Malaysia, and even then this was limited to urban Chinese areas. Even the Barisan Nasional had relied upon local component parties and only began allocating seats in Sabah to its national-level partners in the 1990s.

This parochialism has not entirely overriden ethnic politics: while nominally multi-ethnic parties have, at different times, dominated state politics (notably, the *Berjaya* party between 1976 and 1984 and the *Parti Bersatu Sabah* between 1985 and 1993), these parties have typically been – or come to be – associated with particular ethnic or religious agendas. In part, this may well be due to the second factor highlighted above: the predominance of 'big men' on the Sabah political scene. While patronage and clientalism in Malaysia are by no means unique to Sabah, the 'big men' of Sabah politics are often associated with a cultural as well as economic role – epitomized by the invented tradition of *huguan siou* ('paramount chief') of the Kadazandusun, the largest ethnocultural grouping in Sabah, a title draped with cultural practice and imagery but only ever bestowed twice: once to the first Chief Minister of Sabah, Donald (later Fuad) Stephens; and, subsequently to the current incumbent, the president of *Parti Bersatu Sabah* (PBS) since its founding, Joseph Pairin Kitingan.

While Sabah is often referred to on both sides of the political divide as a 'fixed deposit' for the Barisan Nasional, this combination of parochialism and personality politics has occasionally given rise to radical shifts in the political make-up of the state, notably in 1976 when the newly formed and ostensibly opposition (but Kuala Lumpur-backed) *Berjaya* party ousted the BN-allied Sabah Alliance from the state government; and, in 1985 when *Berjaya* itself was subsequently ousted by the PBS (see Lim 2008 for an analysis of this era). In both cases, the victorious party sought and was admitted to the BN coalition, although relations between PBS and the federal government in Kuala Lumpur were fractious and finally broke down on the eve of the 1990 general election, prompting PBS to leave the coalition.

For the Barisan Nasional, the challenge in handling Sabah has hence been to bring it more closely within the normal parameters of Malaysian politics, a feat that it made quite effective progress towards during the 1990s. Ironically enough, the main political

[1] For studies of specific elections, see, e.g., Glick (1965), Ramanathan Kalimuthu (1986), and Chin (1994); for a more general account, see Brown (2003).

orchestrator of this effort in its early years was the then deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, who oversaw a twin programme of federally-subsidized developmentalism and party-political manoeuvring in Sabah that effectively neutered the local parties and established the BN as the dominant political force in the state.[2] First UMNO, and then the MCA, began contesting seats in Sabah, with UMNO establishing itself as the largest party in the state. By the turn of the century, the local political parties in Sabah were faced with the prospect of inclusion in the BN with very limited but fairly well-assured political prospects; or, fragmented opposition with little likelihood of electoral success. Most chose the former, including the erstwhile nemesis of the BN in Sabah, Joesph Pairin Kitingan and his PBS.

By the turn of the 21st century, then, the BN had come to grips with the political dynamics of Sabah and effectively asserted its dominance of the state. In both 2004 and 2008, it won all but one of the parliamentary seats in the state. In the state assembly, the BN likewise dominated in 2008, with the opposition winning only one out of the parliamentary – the state capital, Kota Kinabalu, where the BN was beaten into third place behind the Democratic Action Party in first place and Anwar's Parti Keadilan Rakyat in second place – and one state assembly seat. While the opposition victories were slight, however, during the 2008 General Election in Sabah, a number of urban areas showed significant increase in votes for the opposition parties, especially when the DAP and PKR votes were combined. These areas were DUN or state seats in Inanam, Likas, Luyang, Tanjung Aru, and Kepayan. The other two areas were the semi-urban places of Kuala Penyu and Merotai where the combined voters for PKR and Independents could have defeated the Barisan Nasional. While the BN continued to dominate in terms of seat, then, the 2008 General Election result in Sabah witnessed an emerging voting trend in favour of political change, at least in the urban areas.

While national political issues certainly play a role in Sabah, then, understanding the election results in Sabah requires a local perspective and, in particular, one that is focused on the dynamics and strategies of the opposition parties. For the BN, the 2013 election in Sabah was politics 'as usual': promises of developmentalism and heralding the coalition's track record as well as, critics suggest, more dubious methods of electoral manipulation. What marks out the 2013 election, both in terms of its successes and failures, was the strategy of the opposition parties, and this hence constitutes the focus of this report.

[2] For an account of this 'developmentalist' transformation, see Loh (1997); for an account that places this within the longue duree of Sabah politics, see Brown (2003).

II. Opposition politics or opposition politicking? Big men, 'winnable candidates' and the opposition strategy in the run-up to the 2013 election

Between 2008 and 2013, a clear tension emerged among the opposition ranks, and particularly within PKR, between, on the one hand, those advocating a 'grassroots' strategy of building up support in the rural areas; and, on the other hand, those who sought to win over the erstwhile 'big men' of Sabah politics in the hopes of attracting bloc votes to the opposition slate. The PR manifesto and broader political approach is, critics from within suggest[3], urban focused, lacking in policy considerations for rural developments and it had failed to deliver the promise of local autonomy to the leaders in the rural areas where PKR supporters were dominant. The DAP had far focused on the urban and Chinese dominated areas, whereas PKR has so far been concentrated in the rural areas, and likewise, candidate selection has been largely formulated around the ethnic distribution factor.

At the local level in Sabah, the PKR party structure had worked on the basis of branch leaders, *ketua cabang*, in mobilizing the grass roots in the rural areas. *Ketua cabang* were responsible for running the PKR branch offices, recruitment, organizing events for federal leaders in Sabah, and most importantly, they were tasked with raising funds for the branch. Many *ketua cabang* contributed their own resources for these purposes; several such leaders reported spending around RM40,000 of their own money on party activities.[4] The federal leadership, however, tended over this period to prefer a strategy of wooing 'big men' into the opposition ranks.

In 2012, in the long run up to the election, a number of incumbent BN politicians resigned from their parties. Amid much speculation, they did not join the opposition ranks but instead sat as 'PR-friendly' independents. On 29 July 2012, Wilfred Bumburing resigned from UPKO to form Angkatan Perubahan Sabah or Sabah Reform Alliance (APS), as a Pakatan Rakyat friendly NGO. The outward claim was that this movement would not directly engage in party politics; in a press statement on 4 December 2012, Wilfred Bumburing stated that "Angkatan Perubahan Sabah (APS) will not promote any particular candidate in the coming general election. APS instead focus its strength on uniting Sabahans behind opposition candidates challenging the Barisan Nasional's hold on power… We in APS are committed to support any candidate that will be fielded by any political party in PR

[3] Interviews with PR activists during campaign period.
[4] Interviews with anonymous *ketua cabang* during campaign period.

in the coming election" (Bingkasan 2012). Another high profile defector, Lajim Ukin, took a similar strategy, launching his own NGO Pertubuhan Pakatan Perubahan Sabah (PPPS)

Nonetheless, many of the local PKR leaders were wary that the APS and PPPS and their leadership would be parachuted in to contest for the opposition. Activists close to the former PKR state liaison chief Ansaari Abdullah reported concerns that years of grassroots activism that had targeted precisely these leaders as epitomising the perceived corruption of the BN system would be undone if they were selected as opposition candidates.[5]

On 5 April, as the election approached, Ansari Abdullah as the chief for the North West Coast PKR announced seven names to contest seven Parliamentary Constituencies, in a bid to pre-empt any likely 'hijacking' by the party's national leadership and to prevent seat demands from APS. Ansari claimed that many PKR supporters and grass roots members were questioning the 'sincerity' of the PR national leadership in returning local autonomy to Sabah and stated that all the Ketua Cabang in these seven constituencies demanded candidates for Parliamentary seats that would be endorsed by the official members the PKR Sabah. Ansari, however, was quickly over-ruled by the new state liaison chief, Ahmad Thamin Jairi, with a formal announcement of the candidate list for the party nine parliament and 23 state seats allocated to the APS and PPPS; Ansari himself was not to be a candidate. Moreover, the list suggested a clear ethnic political strategy within PKR; the APS, headed by the Christian bumiputera Bumburing, was slated to contest in Christian-dominated areas. Likewise, Lajim's PPPS – which had been more explicitly formed 'to represent the Muslim bumiputera of Sabah' (Bernama 2012) – was slated to contest in Muslim areas. The list provoked an immediate backlash; four PKR division leaders resigned from the party and a number of independent candidates were announced in areas contested by the APS and PPPS, including Ansari's daughter who stood as an independent in his political heartland, Tuaran.

The campaign in Sabah, then, in some senses continued the dominant political and historical trope of the tension between localism and the promises of federally-driven (if not -directed) development, but this tension was played out *within* the opposition coalition, and the ranks of the PKR in particular. With the BN having effectively marshalled its forces, there were few visible tensions within the government coalition, in contrast to 2008, when

[5] This was a consistent refrain in interviews conducted with a range of anonymous PKR activists across the west coast and central areas of Sabah.

intra-coalition politicking particularly among the Chinese parties had contributed to its (albeit few) losses.

In many ways, then, the results of the election are all the more remarkable. As we shall see, despite the clearly disunity and fractiousness within the opposition ranks, the PR nonetheless secured a significant swing in the popular vote, albeit a swing that did not translate into an equivalent increase in seats. In the next section, we examine these results and try to unpick how far the ethnically-charged 'big man' logic of the opposition strategy can account for its successes.

III. Results and analysis

The Barisan Nasional were the clear victors in Sabah, retaining their dominance of the parliamentary seats and state assembly alike, although the opposition did make some inroads (see Table 1). In 2008, the opposition parties had won only one parliamentary seat, the Chinese-majority state capital of Kota Kinabalu, which was won by the DAP despite a split opposition vote, with the BN pushed into third place by PKR. In 2013, the opposition maintained Kota Kinabalu with a landslide win – PKR did not contest the seat this time round – and added to its tally the east coast urban centre of Sandakan (won by the DAP) and the Dusun heartland of Penampang, where the BN component UPKO lost its leader and long-time community leader Bernard Dompok, to a relatively unknown PKR candidate, Ignatius Dorrell Leiking. Yet the extent of the BN victory was largely a reflection of the first-past-the-post electoral system. As Table 1 shows, the modest increase in opposition seats at the parliamentary level was not reflective of a quite significant swing in overall voting, with the BN share of the vote plummeting from just over three quarters in 2008 to just over a half in 2013.

Table 1: Election results in Sabah, 2008 and 2013

Party	**Parliament**				**State Assembly**			
	2008		**2013**		**2008**		**2013**	
	Seats	%Vote	Seats	%Vote	Seats	%Vote	Seats	%Vote
BN	24	77.3	22	55.3	59	76.2	48	55.8
PR	1	17.7	3	36.1	1	17.7	11	32.2
STAR			0	5.4			1	5.7
Others	0	5.0	0	3.2	0	6.1	0	6.3
Total	25		25		60		60	

With sixty seats in the state assembly, we can perform some technical analysis to see how robust the ethnic voting patterns were. As always, such results must be read with a degree of caution; they are indicative rather than explanatory as they are based on a strong ecological assumption that macro-voting trends are directly reflective of individual behaviour. Nonetheless the strength of these results suggest that there are indeed clear ethnic voting patterns in Sabah.

As a first step, we can examine overall ethnic diversity at the constituency level and its relationship to the BN's electoral performance. In West Malaysia, the BN has typically performed better in ethnically-mixed constituencies, with its performance falling off both in Malay-dominated seats and in Chinese-dominated seats.[6] This pattern, however, does not hold out in Sabah. Figure 1 plots the BN share of the vote in each state assembly seat against two indices of constituency-level ethnic diversity. The *polarization* index measures how far a constituency approaches a 50:50 split between two ethnic groups.[7] The *fractionalization* index measures how far the constituency is split into a large number of small ethnic groups.[8] In West Malaysia, both indices have typically been good predictors of BN performance but, as the figure demonstrates, this does not hold in Sabah; the is no statistical relationship between either index and the BN share of the vote in 2013 on either index (R-squared correlation of less than 0.01 in both cases).

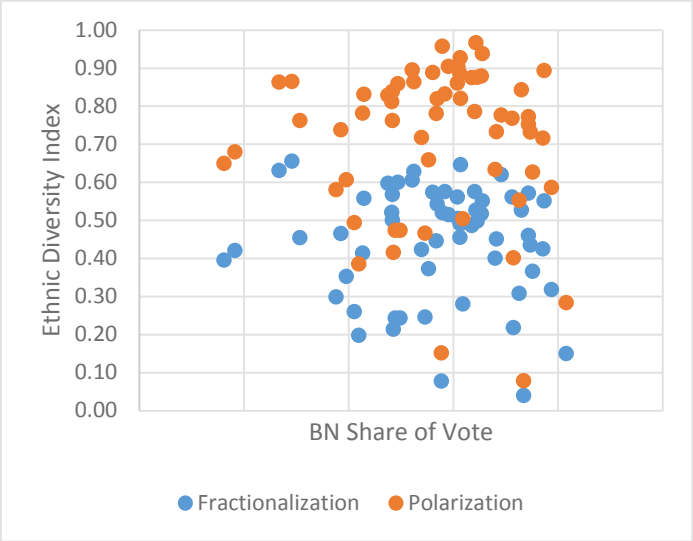

Figure 1: Constituency Level Ethnic Diversity and BN Performance

[6] See, for instance, Brown (2005) for details of this effect.
[7] For a discussion of this index by its developers, see Montalvo and Reynal-Querol (2002).
[8] See Alesina et al (2002).

Rather than reflecting the overall diversity of constituencies, voting patterns in Sabah 2013 do indeed follow a much more linear ethnic pattern. We use a constrained linear regression on the DUN seat results to estimate ethnic voting. The Election Commission provides estimates of the ethnic distribution of each constituency broken down into four categories: Muslim bumiputera, non-Muslim bumiputera, Chinese, and 'other'. Because of colinearity, we cannot use the ethnic *proportion* of the voting roll in each constituency as predictors (as they all sum to 1). Instead, we estimate the absolute number of each type of vote by simply multiplying through the estimated proportion against the total number of votes cast; it should be noted that this assumes that all ethnic groups had equal turnout rates. We use these figures as the predictor variables. Our dependent variable is the raw number of votes garnered by the BN in each constituency. We constrain the coefficients on each variable to vary between 0 and 1 and suppress the constant.[9] This allows a direct interpretation of the coefficients as estimates of the proportion of each group that voted for the BN although, as noted above, the results need to be interpreted with caution.

The regression results are displayed in Table 2. The interpretation of these results is that around 80% of Muslim bumiputera voted BN; 40% of non-Muslim bumputera voted BN; and, around 10% of Chinese voted BN. These results all have a very high level of statistical significance. At a slightly lower level of significance is the results for 'Others'. The model suggests that *all* 'Others' voted BN; a result that seems surprising statistically but is perhaps less surprising to those who believe that large numbers of illegal immigrants were allowed voting rights and may have been included as 'others' – the seats with large numbers of 'others' on the electoral roll are places such as Kunak and Balung where large plantation estates are home to many migrant workers, legal and illegal.

While this kind of statistical exercise is clearly not perfect, it is worth noting that the overall explanatory fit of this model is extremely high: with an R-squared value of 0.85, we can explain almost 90% of the variation in DUN results in Sabah simply by assuming these ethnic voting patterns.

[9] Constraints were performed using the cnsreg command in Stata.

Table 2: Constrained regression results: BN share of vote by ethnic composition of DUN constituency

Ethnic Group (% of voters)	Estimate	Std. Error.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Muslim Bumiputera	0.791 ***	0.030	0.730	0.852
Non-Muslim Bumiputera	0.410 ***	0.028	0.353	0.466
Chinese	0.097 ***	0.048	0.001	0.193
Other	1.000 **	0.252	0.496	1.504
Pseudo-R^2	0.850			
N. observations	60			

*Asterisks designate levels of statistical significance: *<0.10 **<0.05 ***<0.01*

We have seen, then, that voting in Sabah followed a very linear ethnic logic with a similar pattern repeated across the state. We can extend the analysis to ask how far the 'winnable candidates' fielded by the opposition in particular seats made a difference. As we have seen, the APS and PPPS were not particularly successful in winning seats, but did they nonetheless perform better or worse than other opposition candidates? Table 3 shows the average BN share of the vote in DUN seats constituencies broken down by the type of candidate fielded by the opposition – whether they came from the APS or the PPPS, or neither. We ran t-tests to establish how statistically significant these differences were.

Table 3: BN share of the vote by opposition candidate origin

Opposition candidate	Mean BN share	Difference	t-value	Significance
Neither APS or PPPS	55.7%			
APS	51.7%	-4.0%	1.760	0.090 *
PPPS	63.8%	8.1%	-2.787	0.008 ***
APS or PPPS	58.3%	2.6%	-0.729	0.469

The results show that on average, the BN performed around 4% worse in seats where APS candidates were fielded than otherwise, but around 8% better in seats where PPPS candidates were fielded. As far as the APS is concerned, however, the difference is only marginally significant (P<z=0.09); we cannot be confident that this difference is not simply random. For the PPPS, the statistical significance is much stronger: we can be very confident that the BN did much better in seats where the Pakatan Rakyat fielded PPPS candidates than in other seats.

This by itself is, however, is only the first step in answering the question. We know from the preceding analysis that there were clear ethnic voting patterns in Sabah, but we also know that the APS and PPPS candidates tended to be fielded in seats with a particular ethnic

make-up. Specifically, PPPS candidates tended to be fielded in seats with a majority of Muslim bumiputera, while APS candidates tended to be fielded in seats with a majority of non-Muslim bumiputera (see Table 4). In order to determine whether the type of opposition candidate had an effect over and above the ethnic distribution of the seats in which they contested, we need to return to multivariate regression analysis.

Table 4: Ethnic distribution of DUN constituency by opposition candidate

Opposition candidate	Average % Muslim bumiputera	Average % non-Muslim bumiputera	Average % Chinese
Neither APS nor PPPS	43.4%	34.2%	17.8%
APS	32.5%	60.6%	6.2%
PPPS	66.6%	22.4%	7.7%

In the previous regression, we were interested in estimating the proportion of each ethnic group that voted for the BN, so we used the absolute number of votes garnered by the BN and constrained the coefficients on the ethnic variables. For this analysis, we are more concerned with the proportion of votes that the BN received. In addition, because we are including extra variables over and above the ethnic variables, constraining the coefficients no longer makes sense. Instead, we use the proportion of votes received by the BN as the dependent variable. We run two separate regressions. For the PPPS, we use as predictor variables the proportion of Muslim bumiputera in the constituency (the community to whom these candidates were supposed to appeal) and include a simply dummy variable that scores 1 if the candidates was PPPS and 0 otherwise. The interpretation of the coefficient on the ethnic variable is difficult but, to some extents, irrelevant; what we are concerned with here is whether there the PPPS dummy is significant or not. The interpretation of the dummy variable is simple: it can be interpreted as the extra proportion of votes that the BN received (or, if negative, the proportion fewer it received) in seats where the PPPS contested *compared to seats with a similar ethnic demography* where a non-PPPS candidate was fielded. We perform a similar analysis for the APS, with the non-Muslim bumiputera as the main predictor variable.

The results are presented in Table 5. The coefficients suggest that where the opposition fielded a PPPS candidate, the BN received 2.4% fewer votes that it would otherwise, but where the opposition contested an APS candidate, it received around the same proportion *more.* In both cases, however, the dummy variables have no reasonable level of

statistical significance whatsoever. The overall interpretation of this, then, is that the 'winnable' candidates made no difference to the way Sabahans voted, one way or the other.

Table 5: Election results for 'winnable' candidates

PPPS	Coeff	St Err	t-stat	Sig.
Muslim bumiputera (% voters)	0.442	0.053	8.341	***
PPPS candidate (Yes=1)	-0.024	0.035	-0.684	
Constant	0.367	0.026	14.04	***
R-squared	0.575			
N. observations	60			
APS	Coeff	St Err	t-stat	Sig.
non-Muslim bumiputera (% voters)	-0.215	0.065	-3.302	***
APS candidate (Yes=1)	0.023	0.049	0.465	
Constant	0.64	0.029	22.332	***
R-squared	0.166			
N. observations	60			

IV. Conclusion

The 2013 election results in Sabah represented a significant swing towards the opposition, albeit one that did not translate into strong gains in terms of seats. Yet the conduct of the election created significant tensions within the opposition ranks over candidate selection and broader electoral strategy between local grassroots leaders who championed issues of autonomy and rural development on the one hand, and federally-selected candidates who championed a more ethnically-oriented agenda. The results, in many ways, reflect this paradox. On the one hand, there is clear evidence that Sabahans did indeed vote along ethnic lines. Yet on the other hand, it is evident that the orientation of individual candidates did not affect voter sentiments at the local level, suggesting that party agenda and party affiliation may indeed have been the primary driver in voting patterns. While the results of the election in raw percentages may seem promising to those seeking greater change in Sabah, the internal damage done by the political strategies adopted within the opposition ranks may well outweigh these gains in the longer run.

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