

ELECTIONS

A Stunning Upset in Sabah

It was Sunday night, Apr. 21, just hours after the close of staggered two-day polling in the East Malaysian state of Sabah. Harris Salleh, chief minister for the past nine years, sat in the living room of his official residence in Kota Kinabalu impatiently awaiting the returns. With the flamboyant 54-year-old state helmsman were a handful of close friends and associates.

Harris had been catapulted to the top following the 1976 air crash that killed his boss Fuad Stephens and other senior officials of the ruling Berjaya Party, swept into power less than six weeks earlier, in the process ousting the United Sabah National Organisation of Tun Mustapha Harun. Five years later Harris led Berjaya to an even more convincing victory, winning 44 of 48 state assembly seats. This time around the going was expected to be much tougher, but Berjaya leaders were still highly confident of a resounding victory. On the sprawling lawn outside Harris's home supporters manned a large scorecard indicative of the Berjaya mood: it predicted the ruling party would take 47 of 48 seats. Inside, champagne bottles were chilling in a corner. A pianist played soft music, the tempo of which was to increase once results showed a Berjaya majority. Then the party would begin.

It never did. From early returns it was quickly clear there would be nothing for Harris and Berjaya to celebrate. As the night wore on fair-weather supporters frittered away; the pianist stopped playing. For Berjaya the results were disastrous: state cabinet ministers and other party stalwarts were losing their seats. Even Harris himself was not immune. He fell in his Tenom constituency to unknown Kadoh Agundong from the new Parti Bersatu Sabah (Sabah United Party), the group that would win 25 seats — and take the polls. Harris didn't give up power gracefully. In a move many Malaysians liken to a coup attempt, Harris made a pact with erstwhile archrival Mustapha, himself an election winner, to form a coalition state government — even though the two parties' combined tally (Berjaya's six and USNO's 16) fell short of PBS's. For 15 hours Mustapha held the chief ministership and the nation was in the throes of a constitutional crisis. It took federal intervention to deliver the state leadership to its rightful claimant: PBS boss Joseph Pairin Kitingan.

As informed sources tell it, the scenario unfolded this way. By 2 a.m., his Tenom constituency already lost, Harris huddled with associates. Harris's plan was to permit the six Berjaya candidates who had won their contests to pledge their support for USNO. Sources close to Harris told *Asiaweek* that the idea was to let Mustapha first form a government with USNO's 16 seats, then have the Berjaya assemblymen vote against it. The governor would then be forced to dissolve the assembly and call a fresh

election. As Harris tells it, he called Musa merely to inform him that he was asking the elected Berjaya six to support a Mustapha government. "There was no talk of a coalition with USNO," says Harris.

Musa says otherwise. In a statement later Musa said "Harris asked my permission that Berjaya under his leadership join USNO to form the new state government." Musa said he told Harris he could not permit this because he had to consider several factors including "full results showing position of the parties contesting



Harris Salleh: "I'm not running away...I intend to fight on"

election into which Berjaya would pour all its resources, concentrating on 20 or so marginal seats instead of spreading itself thinly, as it had for last week's. Harris reckoned the result would probably be an assembly with no party holding a majority. As the sole Sabah member of the Barisan Nasional coalition that rules Malaysia, Berjaya would then be better placed to lead a coalition state government with either USNO or PBS.

For the plan to work Berjaya needed not only Mustapha's cooperation but that of federal authorities. At 3:40 a.m., when results for all but two of the 48 seats had been declared, Harris placed a call to Kuala Lumpur to Deputy Prime Minister Musa Hitam, acting chief executive in the absence of Premier Mahathir Mohamad, who is touring Western Europe.

and the total number of votes [which] was not known yet." The Deputy PM added that he told Harris he needed "time to discuss with Barisan leaders any course of action [and] to consider thoroughly all aspects and implications."

Despite the diplomatic tone, Musa's rejection was just that. Harris, say highly-placed Berjaya sources, felt betrayed. "He has never trusted Musa," one senior partyman told *Asiaweek*. "There was no way he could reach the Prime Minister so he decided to implement his plan anyway."

Minutes later Berjaya publicity chief Majid Khan, a relative and close personal friend of Harris, and state assemblyman Abdul Malek Chua went by limousine to Mustapha's house. Musta-



Pairin in victorious mood: In the end, federal intervention was needed to restore the state leadership to its rightful claimant

pha didn't require any urging to agree. He quickly got dressed and drove to the *istana* (palace) where Governor Tun Adnan Robert was waiting to give him the oath of office as Sabah's chief minister again. Governor Adnan had by then already received a call from Harris to let him know he had resigned and that Mustapha was on his way. The governor's office, meanwhile, had awakened Borneo Chief Justice Lee Hun Hoe and state Attorney-General Nicholas Fung and summoned them to the palace for the swearing-in. Insiders say neither was told who was being sworn in as chief minister. In fact, both thought Pairin was going to take the oath. Instead, they found Mustapha there in a dark suit.

Pairin's people, meanwhile, had also been trying to call the *istana*. They wanted to know if their boss could take his oath as chief minister at 9:30 a.m. When they couldn't get through they turned up at the palace in person, only to find the main gate padlocked; security officers said the governor and his staff were asleep.

Inside, Adnan Robert was trying to persuade Chief Justice Lee and Attorney-General Fung to swear in Mustapha. But the lawmen were hesitant: it was unconstitutional, they argued, to swear in someone whose party did not command support. Insiders say Mustapha repeated the arguments Majid Khan had earlier made to him: that although Berjaya and USNO combined did not have an assembly majority they together had secured more than half the popular vote (PBS had won 36%). Moreover, Mustapha continued, PBS lacked crucial Muslim support, a severe political liability.

But Lee and Fung were not convinced. Just after 5 a.m. Pairin's aides saw the padlocked gate of the *istana* swing open and the limousine carrying the lawmen race past. "We immediately sensed something fishy was going on inside," a Pairin aide said later. It was Governor Adnan who accepted Mustapha's argument. At 5:30 a.m. he himself swore the USNO boss in.

As dawn broke Kota Kinabalu was beginning to buzz with rumours of unrest: houses burning, street clashes between rival political groups. But, cabled *Asia-week's* Assif Shameen from the state capital, "the rumours were unfounded. There was no incidence of violence in Sabah after the election." Still, the rumours were strong enough to prompt Pairin to call Musa at 9 that Monday morning. Musa congratulated Pairin on his victory.

In Kota Kinabalu's posh Tanjung Aru suburb Mustapha was also receiving congratulations — from aides and friends for becoming the state's chief minister. But as news of Mustapha's accession spread during the morning, the town prepared for the worst. Shop shutters came

down, office workers started for home. In some supermarkets there was a rush for groceries.

Mustapha appeared unperturbed though. By noon he had issued his first statement as chief minister on plain white paper as he had no access to government stationery with the state crest. Mustapha said he had "accepted the invitation" by the governor to form the new state government. He said his administration "would be fair and just and would carry out its election promises." Mustapha, whose clashes with Kuala Lumpur were legendary during his earlier term as chief minister from 1967-76, added that he would carry out his "responsibilities in accordance with policy and guidance of the federal government. Nobody should therefore be apprehensive that I once again head the government."

Musa, however, clearly was worried. In his capacity as acting premier he issued a statement congratulating the winners

head. "Whatever is happening in Sabah following the election results," it said, "is not in the name of Barisan." For Barisan member Berjaya it was another blow. By then, moreover, Governor Adnan had recalled Chief Justice Lee and Attorney-General Fung as well as the state secretary to withdraw Mustapha's appointment. At 8:30 p.m. Pairin was made Sabah's new chief minister. Mustapha, once told by an astrologer that he would succeed Harris at the post, indeed had — for 15 hours.

Federal authorities received praise for the way they handled the day-long crisis. "If Musa hadn't acted fast enough," noted one political observer in Kota Kinabalu, "Harris and Mustapha might have created a situation from where there might have been no turning back. Once Musa threw the weight of the federal government behind PBS, Harris, Mustapha and the governor had to toe the line. They knew the game was up."

What had been the rules of Harris's game? He reportedly told associates he



Kota Kinabalu town; inset, Mustapha: History more or less repeats itself

and appealing "to those who lost to respect the wishes of the majority." He appealed to all to "accept the people's choice with calm based on the spirit of parliamentary democracy." Musa also reaffirmed that the "federal government will continue to ensure that the security situation [in Sabah] is under control" and that it would "not hesitate to take action" against any group planning to threaten the state's security. Political analysts say Musa's warning was aimed at Harris.

Around noon Pairin finally got to see the governor. Their meeting lasted six hours. The PBS leader told Adnan it was his right to be chief minister since his party had a majority in the state assembly. The governor, assisted by a team of lawyers, eventually yielded, a call from Musa helping to swing the issue. Later that day Musa's office issued another statement, this time in his capacity as acting Barisan *Bahan asal dari Arkib*

acted according to the letter of the state constitution, which states the governor "shall appoint as chief minister a member of the legislative assembly who in his judgement is likely to command the confidence of the majority of the members of the assembly." Harris was of the view that it is the governor's prerogative to appoint anyone who satisfied that condition, regardless of whether he is leader of the majority party or not.

While last week's events in Sabah sparked debate over their constitutionality, they also reminded Malaysians of the 1976 downfall of Mustapha and USNO engineered by Kuala Lumpur. Mustapha had charted an increasingly independent course for his state and his autocratic style had upset many Sabahans. So in the 1976 state elections the federal government backed Berjaya in-

stead and its charismatic Kadazan leader Fuad Stephens. Depending mainly on the Kadazan vote and some support from mixed constituencies, Berjaya won 28 seats against USNO's 20. Pairin, one of the winning Berjaya candidates then, followed a similar strategy. In 1985 the only difference was that he lacked federal support. In the event, however, he didn't need any. Election analysts say there was enough anti-federal sentiment among Sabah voters to swing the tide in his favour. Proud of their autonomy, Sabahans, say observers, were unhappy with the way Harris was wooing Kuala Lumpur. Labuan Island, off the state's west coast, had become a federal territory, and some state agencies were being transferred to federal control.

Harris agrees anti-federal feelings contributed to his downfall. He blames too the playing up of racial and religious issues during campaigning. "As a multi-racial party committed to national unity and close ties with the federal government," he says, "there was little we could do to defend ourselves." But his critics

say his abrasive and flamboyant style and Berjaya's neglect of the Kadazans, who had helped bring the party to power in the first place, were key factors.

There is little doubt, though, that voting was largely along racial lines.* PBS bagged 18 of 19 Kadazan constituencies, the other one going to PBS-backed Pasok. PBS also took four Chinese seats and three mixed ones, where Kadazans and Chinese together formed the majority. USNO took 10 of 11 Muslims seats and six mixed ones where it had either residual support or where the impact of votes of the other communities had been diluted by the presence of numerous candidates. Berjaya had one Chinese seat, one Muslim, four mixed.

Observers say PBS's opponents will capitalise on the apprehension among some Sabah Muslims about how Christian Kadazans will rule. Pairin, alert to the criticism, quickly appointed two Muslims,

*Sabah has arguably the most complex demography among Malaysia's thirteen states. Kadazans form the largest single ethnic group, some 26% of the state's 1.2 million population. Next are the ethnic Chinese at 21.3%. Other groups are Malay Muslims, Bajau Muslims and Muruts.

one converted European woman, among the six members that can be nominated for the state assembly; they were given ministerial posts as well.

As the dust settled attention turned to the future of Harris. Despite rumours that he had fled to Switzerland with his family, Harris was still in Kota Kinabalu at midweek. "I am not running away, I intend to fight on," he told *Asiaweek*. He said he would not quit politics, "not until the next election, which Berjaya will win." But observers say Harris faces a big test at the party's next general assembly in July, when he might be made the scapegoat for the debacle. Says a Harris aide: "I think he wants to stay on just to prove everyone wrong, but the question is whether everybody else wants him to stay as Berjaya leader." Uncertain, too, is whether he will be able to block PBS's entry into Barisan or whether federal leaders might drop Berjaya as they did USNO last year. Whatever happened, Sabah looked set for more political action.

INTERVIEW/JOSEPH PAIRIN KITINGAN

'We're Part of Malaysia'

Three years ago Joseph Pairin Kitingan, a keen chess player, made what many Sabahans figured was an unwise move. Then vice-president of the ruling Berjaya Party, Pairin got himself embroiled in a stormy row with Berjaya boss and state chief minister Harris Salleh during the party's general assembly. Pairin's beef: discrimination against his Kadazan community, the state's single largest with nearly a third of the 1.2 million population. Within months Pairin had quit the state cabinet.

Late last year Pairin also quit Berjaya, a party he helped found. In a by-election later for his Tambunan seat, Pairin ran as an independent and trounced his opponents, garnering nearly 85% of the vote. He hasn't looked back since, first forming his new Parti Bersatu Sabah, then leading it to a stunning victory in last week's state polls. A lawyer by training, Pairin, 45, is today recognised as the *huguan siou* (paramount leader) of Sabah's Kadazans. A day after being sworn in as chief minister he talked with *Asiaweek's* Assif Shameen in Kota Kinabalu. Excerpts:

ON THE POWER STRUGGLE FOLLOWING THE ELECTION:

I think the episode showed that the minority side defeated in the election was trying to wrest power away from those who had just won a mandate. It also shows how undemocratic some of these people are and to what extent they are willing to go to keep power. If Sabah prides itself on being a state that practises democracy we should set a good example. Those of us who commit unconstitutional acts only show that they cannot be fair and that they cannot accept democratic principles.

ON RELATIONS WITH THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT:

I don't see why our relations with the federal govern-

ment should be strained. In our election manifesto we clearly stated that we want to maintain good ties with the federal government. After all, the federal government is the government of Malaysia and we are part of Malaysia. We must be able to communicate properly with one another so that both of us, in particular the federal government, understand our position and the problems we face. We want to prevent any kind of suspicion arising out of our relationship with the federal government. Any relationship must be based on trust from both sides. The federal government should understand that we are a state government that works with the interest of the people of the state and of the nation at heart. We will assure the federal government that we are working to see that national unity and national objectives can be maintained.

ON HIS APPARENT LACK OF SUPPORT AMONG THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN SABAH:

PBS does not represent any particular race or religion. PBS represents the people of the state. I don't think we have ever given the impression that we are against the Muslim population. If you look at the voting pattern carefully you will see that we got a lot of votes in the Muslim constituencies. In many Muslim constituencies our share of votes exceeded the total number of non-Muslim voters, which proves that Muslims voted for us. It is not true that PBS has no support at all among the Muslims. We are trying to do our best to allay the fears of Muslims. Although no Muslim candidates won a seat we have nominated two Muslim members to the state assembly of the six nominated seats. Both of them have been appointed full ministers. So we have two Muslim ministers in a cabinet of seven.

ON TALK OF GROWING RACIAL POLARISATION AS A RESULT OF A RACIALLY-DIVIDED VOTING PATTERN:

I don't think there is any racial polarisation in the state as a result of the election. This is only made up by some of the dissatisfied leaders who are trying to look for scapegoats after losing.