

**Let Jeffrey blaze the trail for Sabah's opposition**  
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Sabah politics has once again come to the limelight with Jeffrey Kitingan's admission into Parti Keadilan Rakyat, or simply Keadilan. Jeffrey is known for jumping one party to another; and has been particularly recognised as the 'brains' behind all things controversial in Sabah politics.

If we can still remember, he stirred the hornet's nest in the late 1980s by pursuing the mother of all issues in Sabah - the Twenty Point Agreement. Jeffrey then was arrested and detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for purportedly plotting Sabah secession from Malaysia.

In short, as an academician once told us, Sabah politics is lame without Jeffrey. Perhaps the question that lingers in the minds of all people is this: why is Jeffrey suddenly making a 'U-turn' by joining the Peninsula-based party? Is his joining the party driven by his belief that the party could make significant inroads like it did in Kuching, Sarawak?

Even though some people regard Jeffrey's political comeback as nothing more than a political stunt, some, however, argue that he was encouraged to join the party in view of the fact that there is no strong opposition in Sabah that can ensure checks and balances in the Umno-dominated state legislative assembly.

A close observer of Sabah politics told us that Jeffrey has nothing constructive to offer to the people of Sabah and that the issues he is trying to play up are 'outdated'. Other observers remarked that it doesn't matter what he does and what matters most is that there is an attempt made to diffuse Umno's growing dominance.

As we believe in the workings of a parliamentary democracy which Malaysia claims to practice, Jeffrey's decision to join Keadilan and the party's presence in Sabah would hopefully provide the opportunity for the people to air their dissatisfactions to the present government.

Interestingly, Jeffrey surprised everyone by launching his 'political comeback' in the predominantly Kadazandusun-majority constituency of Tambunan. Tambunan, about 70km from the capital city of Kota Kinabalu, is the place where Jeffrey's older brother, Joseph Pairin, had his political career transformed, which led to the formation of the Parti Bersatu Sabah, or PBS, which is now one of the state BN component parties.

Did Jeffrey choose Tambunan because just like his brother, he wanted his political career to take a different turn? Well, we think it is very unlikely because unlike Pairin, Jeffrey does not have a significant political mileage that would cause the Tambunan people to pour their sympathy on him.

When the Berjaya government led by Harris Salleh introduced the term 'pribumi' and tried to 'de-Kadazan-ise' Sabah, the Kadazandusun community rallied behind Pairin and gave him their all-out support. So, it was entirely a different case for Pairin then. Yes, it is true that Tambunan is Jeffrey's hometown but does he have something different - if not an entirely new thing - to offer to the Kadazandusun community?

But Jeffrey's comeback must be greeted with an open mind and it is good to remind Umno and the other state BN component parties that the people are tired of the status quo and need alternative avenues to air their plight.

The general feeling in Sabah at this moment is that the state government led by Umno has become too 'strong' and the fact that there is no opposition in the assembly has contributed to the growing perception that 'Umno takes all and leaves very little or nothing for its BN counterparts'.

The assembly is currently controlled by BN - a coalition of multiracial parties - led by Umno followed by PBS, Upko, Sapp, LDP, MCA, PBRS and independents. Umno holds 32 seats while PBS has 13, Upko 5, Sapp 4, LDP 3, MCA 1, PBRS 1 and one independent assemblyperson. Looking at this equation, it is clear that power rests in the hands of Umno assemblypersons.

In politics, numbers make a lot of difference and the absence of opposition assemblypersons in the assembly makes it rather difficult for opposing, if not critical views, to flourish. But can't the BN parties themselves provide opposing views during debates?

Yes, they can, but conventional wisdom has it that when the opposing parties are part of the ruling government, they are bound by collective principles which prevent them from providing critical views. These collective principles, if broken, would normally result in the persons who aired the opposing views being censured or disciplined. So, looking at this scenario, it is necessary for there to be opposition political parties to provide critical views on matters of public interests.

The argument that the people do not want the opposition parties to represent them - as indicated during elections - holds no water in light of the questionable and lack of independence of the electoral process in Malaysia. Unless the Election Commission carries out its responsibilities without the interference from the government, the electoral process in Malaysia will remain doubtful.

As it is, critical views have often been pursued by individual personalities and non-governmental organisations. In the case of Sabah, it has always been Cash led by Patrick Sindu which assumes the role of the ruling state's government's 'shadow cabinet' and not to mention Keadilan, which is now working actively with the grassroots and concerned citizens. Sadly, some quarters in the state BN accuse Sindu and his Cash colleagues of overstepping their role as a watchdog for consumer issues.

But since NGOs are not in the state assembly and have no legislative power to introduce or amend policies, their roles have always been seen as secondary and ineffective. However secondary and ineffective their roles may be however, they contribute significantly to the fulfillment of the basic pillar of parliamentary democracy which Malaysia claims to adopt and that is engaging the ordinary citizens and articulating their plights and concerns to those in power.

One may dispute Jeffrey's sincerity or make an assumption that his merely attempting a political comeback, driven by a desire to grab power. But for all of us who view democracy as the ideal type of governance, Jeffrey and his counterparts in Keadilan must be commended and supported for their efforts in ensuring that power is not abused by certain individuals and that the people's voices are heard appropriately.

As the general elections nearing, it is time for the people to once again think wisely about

whom to vote in and whom to vote out. The case in Sabah provides the opportunity for the people to ponder deeply about what happened to the Berjaya-led government in 1985 when the people's power proved to be pivotal in overthrowing Harris Salleh and his men from the corridors of power. It is time for the people in Sabah to once again exercise the very power that is vested in them - the power to vote for the right kind of leaders.

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