

**Sabah and Sarawak - A question of equal status**  
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KOTA KINABALU – Sabah Umno veteran Karim Ghani (left) wants the question of Sabah's equal partner status in Malaysia to be re-affirmed by the state assembly. This is the only way to end the recurrent polemics on the issue, he said.

"It is incumbent upon the present leadership in Sabah to say that this is our position," said Karim, an Indian-Dusun, who was one of the translators for the Cobbold Commission (CoCom) which worked on the Malaysia Agreement.

"Either the state government or the opposition should bring this up in the state assembly."

He was giving his take on the issue of Malaysia being a partnership in a curtain-raiser for the run-up to National Day on Aug 31 and Malaysia Day on Sept 16. Malaysia Day will be celebrated officially for the first time this year in 47 years.

Sabah's position in the Malaysia must be clarified once and for all, continued Karim, as one of the three components in the federation and not one of the 13 states.

"If Tunku Abdul Rahman had said in 1963 that Sabah, along with Sarawak, would be just one of 15 states (including Singapore and Brunei) in the new federation (Malaysia), I don't think that we would have been so stupid as to accept it," said Karim. "Singapore and Brunei would not have accepted it either."

Delving further into the issue, Karim stressed that the question of whether Sabah is one of the 13 states in Malaysia or one of three components – Sabah, Sarawak, Peninsular Malaysia – is a very important one. "One of 13 means a 7.3 per cent share each for Sabah and Sarawak," said Karim. "Who has the right to take away the other 26 per cent share of each state?"

He conceded that when Brunei was still in the picture, the share of each of the proposed five components was only 20 per cent but this increased to 25 per cent each when the sultanate stayed out, and finally Singapore's pull-out saw the shares of the remain three components at 33.3 per cent each.

He noted that some historians and constitutional law experts in Peninsular Malaysia are putting a new spin on the issue. The consensus among the Peninsular Malaysians seem to be that while Sabah and Sarawak have some special rights within the federation, it does not detract from the fact that both states are just like any other state in Malaysia, fumed Karim. "They appear to be questioning and denying the very roots of the formation of Malaysia."

The question of the status of the 11 states in Peninsular Malaysia was of no concern of Sabah and Sarawak, held Karim, "and they can't aspire to the status of the Malaysian Borneo states who are party to the 1963 Malaysia Agreement".

In Karim's view, the status of Sabah and Sarawak in Malaysia was also beyond the oft-cited autonomy of the two states. When Tunku raised the subject of five nations – Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei – forming Malaysia, it was all about equal rights, equal components and equal status, he recalled as a CoCom translator.

He also recalled the Tunku's pitch line when selling the idea of Malaysia to the other four

components i.e. that they were colonized, they were poor, and that they were undeveloped. In short, forming Malaysia would elevate the other partners to the same status as Malaya i.e. rich and developed.

"Unfortunately, the reverse has happened after nearly 47 years of Malaysia," said Karim. "Sabah is the poorest in the federation, followed by Sarawak."

To add insult to injury, the Sabah Umno firebrand lamented that the Chief Minister of Sabah was today appointed by Putrajaya and not by the people in the state. This was no different from the time before Malaysia when the Governors of Sabah were appointed by London.

On whether there could have been an amendment to the Federal Constitution resulting in the status of Sabah and Sarawak being reduced to just one of the many states in Malaysia, he begged to differ. "If it was done, then we are not aware of it or at least we were not a party to it".

Singapore's departure from Malaysia, according to Karim, spelled the end of the partnership agreement.

He suspects that the federal government may have quietly changed the status of the Malaysian Borneo states at this time when Donald Stephens, the Sabah Chief Minister, asked for a review of the Malaysia Agreement. Stephens cited Singapore's departure as the reason for the review but Kuala Lumpur quickly shot down his proposal and packed him off to Australia as High Commissioner.

Karim, in a parting shot, disclosed that he was also against the 1Malaysia theme being propagated by Prime Minister Mohd Najib Abdul Razak. "1Malaysia means that we are all equal," pointed out Karim. "But the 13 states in Malaysia are not equal in status."

The 11 states in Peninsular Malaysia are of course equal to each other, stressed Karim. "In turn, Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak are the three components in Malaysia which are of equal status."

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