

**For BN, Sabah RCI is 'do or die'**  
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**By Clara Chooi**

KOTA KINABALU, Aug 11 — Every day in Kota Kinabalu, some 200 predominantly Filipino traders parade their intricate woven wares, beaded works and other souvenirs for sale at the iconic handicraft market along the city's waterfront here.

Most are legally-registered refugees who fled the Philippines in the 1970s during the Jolo civil war in the south.

They are among the over 80,000 holders of the IMM13 documents, a special immigration pass that allows refugees registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) freedom of movement and employment here.

But although the "Filipino Market" is known today as a popular tourist attraction, it is also a symbol of Sabah's decades-old immigrant problem, an issue that has dominated every single electoral campaign in the state since the 1970s.

Lost sovereignty

The issue has turned emotive among Sabah natives like the Kadazandusun and Murut (KDM) communities, many of whom feel that the state's sovereignty has been stolen through the continued influx of foreigners from countries like the Philippines and Indonesia.

It is no secret that Sabahans are angry and want these foreigners shipped back to their home countries in one way or another. They also often blame the group for robbing them of job opportunities and for the rise in the state's social, economic and security problems.

"Understandably, Malaysians living in Sabah feel threatened and insecure as the number of foreigners keeps increasing. Incidents of drug-related crimes, burglaries and robberies are common," former Sabah state secretary Tan Sri Simon Sipaun wrote in his June 18 article on Sabahkini.

"Gone are the days when we could leave our houses unlocked. Now they are like prisons. Things can only get worse if the demand for jobs is not met by employment opportunities," he added.

The anger among Sabahans has festered over the past four decades and channelled towards the Barisan Nasional (BN) government, largely due to allegations that the ruling pact has been discreetly handing out citizenships to these foreigners, in exchange for their votes.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the country's longest-serving prime minister who ruled from 1981 to 2003, has even been repeatedly accused of spearheading the initiative, known as "Projek M" or "Projek IC".

In a series of interviews conducted by The Malaysian Insider with local politicians here, the same sentiment from Sipaun was expressed.

"It is true the people here are very angry.... a lot needs to be resolved or the number of illegals will keep growing and bring us more problems," Datuk Isnin Aliasnih, an Umno division leader, told this news portal.

"Sabahans are not happy because this has gone on for a long, long time. Illegal immigrants here are nothing new.

"They were an issue in the 1976 election, during the Berjaya government (Sabah People's United Front); they were an issue in the 1981 polls, in 1985, in 1990, in 1995... it has been an issue every election in Sabah ever since (the 1970s).

"And it will be a major issue today," United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO) secretary-general Datuk Wilfred Madius Tangau said when interviewed.

Sabah's population boom and "Projek IC"

Sabah has nearly a million registered voters — 926,638, to be exact, according to a June report in English-language daily The Star.

Recognising the political significance of the problem, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak is due to arrive in the country's easternmost state today to reveal the terms and conditions of the Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI), which BN has finally agreed to establish to solve Sabah's illegals problem.

BN's Sabah-based parties like UPKO and Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) are rejoicing over the panel's formation, a long-fought struggle that finally bore fruit when Najib's Cabinet acquiesced to their wishes on February 8 this year.

But there is still fear among its leaders that the decision may be too late and likely construed as a political ploy timed strategically to boost BN's chances at the ballot boxes in the coming polls.

Adding to this are the recent departures of two BN lawmakers — Tuaran MP Datuk Seri Wilfred Mojilip Bumburing, UPKO's deputy president, and Beaufort MP Datuk Seri Lajim Ukin, an Umno supreme council member.

Both men had cited their dissatisfaction over BN's apparent inaction in the Sabah illegals issue when they pledged support for Pakatan Rakyat (PR) last month.

Speaking to The Malaysian Insider here, Bumburing said BN's decades of refusal to resolve the state's problem with illegal immigrants clearly showed the coalition feared that removing these foreigners would cost them their political dominance over Sabah.

"Now, I can speak out because I am in the opposition. And I am going to accuse the government of a deliberate plan to change the demography of Sabah," the parliamentarian said.

He pointed to recent statistics from a 2010 census of Sabah's population, which showed an extraordinary 390-per cent increase from 636,431 citizens in 1970 to 3,120,040 citizens in 2010 — more than double the national population growth of just 164 per cent.

Of the 3.12 million Sabahans today, reports have estimated that 27 per cent are foreigners.

But Bumburing said that this could be higher still as some of the allegedly illegal foreigners who were granted Malaysian ICs have adopted Muslim names and were "camouflaged" as part of the state's 60 per cent of Malay-Muslims, instead of retaining their original races.

Bumburing's allegation was confirmed by one local who declined to be named when interviewed here recently.

The local, a half-Filipino, told The Malaysian Insider that his father and uncle had left the Philippines for Sabah to make a living in the late 1950s and both men were later offered ICs.

But, he said, this offer had come with conditions: they must adopt Muslim names, "become" Malays and convert to Islam.

The local said his father refused the offer but his uncle snapped it up. As a result, he alleged that his uncle now has to continue attending Umno meetings and must vote for the ruling party, in exchange for his freedom here.

"This is not a new story. There are many like my father and uncle. And there were many who agreed to take the IC and accept these conditions, in order to continue living and working here," he said.

Bumburing said this "citizenships-for-votes" exchange had continued unchecked for decades and has now reached a stage where the foreigners are bold enough to assert dominance and displace the locals in many petty trades.

"I tell you, it has come to stage when these PTIs ('pendatang tanpa izin' or illegal immigrants) dare to speak out. I hear it every day from the people. When they fight for a place to sell vegetables at the markets, our locals are driven out.

"Yesterday (Wednesday) when our locals fought back and said, 'this is our country', these foreigners retaliated and said, 'No, we will be taking over your state very soon'.

"When our officers reprimand them at government departments, they retort, 'don't you be so conceited. Our people will be in your seats soon'," Bumburing recalled.

"These illegals are costing us our resources, causing health, social problems, they bring drugs and they bring disease to Sabah.

But the most important thing is that our sovereignty has been breached and the government has not done anything," he added.

Even worse, Bumburing pointed to allegations that foreigners have now entered Sabah's electoral roll and given the power to determine the state's political future.

According to an analysis conducted by the leader's followers, there are currently an estimated 250,000 foreigners in Sabah's electoral roll, many of whom were allegedly "camouflaged" within the state's local Bumiputera communities.

"So from this, I am very confident that the government is not doing anything. This is why I made my move — I have no more confidence in BN to do this (RCI) and the only way is to change the government," he said.

## Sabah RCI — a “do or die” for BN

The undercurrent of discontent among Sabah natives over the state’s illegals problem, coupled with Bumburing and Lajim’s exits, is said to have caused major ripples in the state’s political landscape.

Already, analysts have pointed to the possibility of a shift in power, but the newly-established RCI and the highly-anticipated terms of reference that Najib is due to announce this afternoon, could save BN its Sabah “fixed deposit”.

For Sabah BN’s KDM-based parties like UPKO and PBS, the RCI is viewed as crucial for their political survival in a state where talk of their slipping support is rife.

Local political scientist Dr Arnold Puyok, who recently caused a stir when he predicted that BN would bleed seats in Sabah to the opposition in the coming polls, told The Malaysian Insider that BN’s flagging support among the KDM community was largely due to a perceived weakness of its KDM-based parties.

“They are seen to be very weak; that they are not fighting hard enough for state rights so the KDM are not happy. Go to the ground and ask people — it is clear that voters are disappointed with leaders like (PBS president Tan Sri Joseph) Pairin Kitingan,” he said when met here.

One UPKO leader who declined to be named told The Malaysian Insider that this sentiment was true.

“Definitely. Definitely... on the ground, there are people who are just getting tired of BN. Definitely. Especially among the KDM Christians and the Chinese and the ‘thinking’ segment of our community.

“Bumburing and Lajim are just riding this tide and this tide is not in our favour,” the leader said.

The leader added that many among the KDM community are angry with Umno’s perceived “overdominance” in Sabah BN and feel that the local parties have been sidelined.

“People may salute our leader like (UPKO president Tan Sri) Bernard Dompok for pushing for the RCI but they say, ‘hey, Umno has not been listening to you so... sorry’,” he said.

Najib is due to announce the details of the Sabah RCI today. UPKO’s Tangau disagreed with the view but admitted that the RCI was a “do or die matter” for his party.

“Because it is part of our party’s founding struggle. If we don’t do this, we are nothing,” he said.

The former two-term Tuaran MP, who held the seat before Bumburing was fielded in Election 2008, said UPKO “could have” even left BN if the government had not agreed to form the royal panel.

He agreed that it would be difficult for the party to cling on as a BN component party if its struggles continued to go unrecognised by the ruling coalition and its dominant Umno partner.

"So now you (BN) are doing things, so we are here. You don't do it, then there's no reason (to stay), isn't it? Then people would look at us and say, 'what are you?' We would become irrelevant. You only stay relevant if what you are doing is addressed.

"So now the government is addressing it and I must salute Najib for having the guts to do it. I am not pre-empting the RCI but whatever it is, it is there and it is a very good step," he said.

Najib is expected to announce the RCI terms of reference after a closed-door meeting with state BN chiefs here this afternoon.

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