

**Sabah: BN fortress turned swing state?**  
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KOTA KINABALU, April 25 — The recent Sulu incursion in Sabah and the tough military response that followed have put the Borneo state front and centre in national politics for weeks.

Even as Barisan Nasional (BN) considers Sabah a fixed deposit state, the ground may be shifting because of these recent events, the Singapore Straits Times reported today.

Given Sabah's recent troubles, the May 5 general election may see the BN's biggest challenge in the state yet, said the report. Adding to the unpredictability, there are just two straight fights this time for the state's 25 parliamentary and 60 state seats, it added.

With the BN and the opposition Pakatan Rakyat locked in a close fight in Peninsular Malaysia, what happens in Sabah could have a disproportionate effect on who wins Putrajaya, it reported.

The Singapore daily said the BN government is asking for another run in office, saying Sabah's safety is best assured by the governing coalition of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

"One vote for BN means one vote for a strong guarantee of Sabah's sovereignty and security," it reported Najib as telling hundreds of Keningau residents in the heartland of the Kadazandusun community yesterday.

And he repeated the message at each of his campaign stops in Kota Kinabalu, Kuala Penyu, and Bongawan before Keningau.

On February 12, 200 Sulu gunmen landed on Sabah's eastern shore to press ancestral claims on parts of the state. The 10-week standoff, coming after revelations that the federal government had given identity cards to illegal immigrants in return for their votes, angered many Sabahans, long worried about crowding out by immigrants.

"The illegal immigrant issue is the single most important issue for many Kadazandusuns," The Straits Times quoted Fred Marukau, a retired school headmaster in Tuarid Taud village near Keningau, as saying.

"So now we are listening more seriously to the opposition parties."

In 2008, when the BN suffered unprecedented losses in Peninsular Malaysia, it won resoundingly in Sabah, sweeping all but one parliamentary and one state seat.

"It's up to us to be kingmakers in Sabah," Dr Jeffrey Kitingan, who leads the independent State Reform Party, was quoted as saying.

To Sabah opposition leaders, the choice is simple: continue to allow federal parties to dictate policies for the state of three million or install a Sabah-based party in the state and control their own destinies, the daily reported.

The paper said Sabah BN this week unveiled a manifesto that promised to resolve the illegal immigrant problem and native land issues, improve security along Sabah's northern and

eastern coasts and reduce poverty from 8.1 per cent to 3 per cent in five years.

Analysts say the economic promises could still hold power. "In the rural areas, politics of development, of basic needs is still very relevant," it quoted Dr Jeniri Amir, a political analyst with Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, as saying.

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