

## **Do Sabahans really need a Sabah party?**

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**By Robin Augustin**

### **Leaders from Warisan, Umno and PKR speak on what they can do for Sabah.**

KOTA KINABALU: Ever since Barisan Nasional took over the Sabah government from Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) in 1994 – due to a string of defections from PBS – and staved off a challenge from the party again in 1999, politics in Sabah has been somewhat predictable.

It's been pretty much one way traffic in subsequent elections, with BN dominating both state-based and national opposition parties, thanks to its lynchpin Umno and other BN components which include PBS – the once mighty Sabahan opposition force which joined the BN for a second time in 2001.

But the “winds of change” which have swept the West Malaysian political landscape in the past two general elections has also reshaped the political discourse and landscape across the South China Sea.

In recent times, Sabah and Sarawak-centric sentiments have flared and spread across the two states' vast lands.

While the late Adenan Satem was viewed by many as the prime mover for Sarawak rights as opposed to a BN “yes man”, in Sabah, a new opposition party wants to spearhead the charge for a “new Sabah”.

Unlike other Sabah-based parties in recent memory, Parti Warisan Sabah (Warisan) appears to have created a real-buzz among the various communities in the state, drawing thousands of members and crowds to its programmes.

And Warisan, led by former federal minister Shafie Apdal, has voiced confidence in its ability to win, with the party's number two, Darell Leiking previously saying it could win a sizeable number of state and parliamentary seats.

But with Sabah still very much a BN and Umno stronghold – and benefiting from billions in federal allocations as BN leaders constantly highlight – does Sabah really need a Sabah-based party?

Warisan vice-president Junz Wong certainly believes so.

In an interview with FMT, Wong said that no non-Sabah based party could truly fulfil the aspirations of Sabahans and deliver on the rights enshrined in the Malaysia Agreement.

“DAP is a good party, but the nature of Malaysian politics means they can’t fully meet the aspirations of Sabahans,” said Wong, who was Sabah DAP secretary until he left the party to join Warisan last year.

The Likas assemblyman, who won on a DAP ticket in the 2013 general election, said Sabahans and Sarawakians want rights due to them so they can fulfil their own destiny.

“A lot of things in Sabah, such as policies and licenses pertaining to agriculture, development projects, utilities, fisheries and tourism to name a few, are controlled by Putrajaya.

“So much power, which should belong to the state, is concentrated there. What is decided there affects our rice bowl, and only a Sabah party would know what’s best for our rice bowl. Not a national party, be it a party in BN or Pakatan Harapan.”

He said national parties wouldn’t be able to truly give Sabah what it deserves or wants due to political concerns in Peninsular Malaysia.

Wong gave the example of hiring policies in the civil service in Sabah, saying there were some 14,000 teachers from Peninsular Malaysia in the state.

He said Sabahan teachers should fill any and all positions in the state, as they understood the culture and way of life in East Malaysia, where people from all walks of life lived in peace and harmony.

“If Warisan forms the government we will ask all 14,000 teachers to return to Peninsular Malaysia and replace them with Sabahan teachers,” Wong said.

“Can DAP or Umno say they are willing to do the same? Of course not, because if they do so, they’re bound to lose votes in Peninsular Malaysia. And this is just one example, there are many more.”

He added there was nothing wrong with Warisan pushing for a Sabah agenda and rights due to the state.

### **Sabah BN’s track record**

Sabah Umno strongman Abdul Rahim Ismail says the state BN has a proven track record, even though Umno is a national party.

In an interview with FMT, Rahim, who is Sabah BN Backbenchers Club chairman said when Umno first entered the state, the party was labelled as “colonisers” by its critics.

“But you can see that Sabah Umno’s leadership are all Sabahans, unlike some parties which parachute leaders in from other states.

“And our way is to properly discuss issues with the federal government. Everything we want, we will get and our track record is evidence of this, especially under our present Chief Minister Musa Aman who has secured the best ‘deals’ for Sabah which the opposition refuses to acknowledge,” Rahim said.

He said a state-based party didn’t guarantee results, pointing to the time before BN took over in 1994 when the poverty rate in the state was 28%. Now, Rahim said, the poverty rate stood at less than 4%.

“We worked on this over the years. We have proper channels and we use them. That’s why for us, negotiation is the best way. Look at the amount of federal funds and projects entering the state, we’re getting billions,” the Pantai Manis assemblyman said.

Recently, Prime Minister Najib Razak noted that Sabah received the highest development allocation among all states from the federal government for the first two years of the 11th Malaysia Plan (2016-2020).

The RM9 billion allocated amounts to 10.3% of the federal government’s overall budget. He also noted that Putrajaya has allocated RM12.8 billion for the construction of the Pan Borneo Highway in Sabah which stretches from Sindumin in the Sipitang district in western Sabah to Tawau in the east.

“Of course the opposition will say anything and everything. They can promise the moon, as in matters like education.

“But it’s not so straightforward because in reality, such matters come under the federal government, and the best thing to do is to sit down and discuss such matters with them, which our CM is doing,” he said.

### **National parties relevant**

Despite Warisan’s speedy growth in the state – the party has over 30,000 members in less than three months after it was formed – Sabah PKR chairman Christina Liew believes national opposition parties are still very much relevant in the state.

The Api-Api assemblywoman said in the last general election (GE13), Sabahans elected a total of 13 parliamentary and state assembly representatives from DAP and PKR, who at the time were part of the now-defunct Pakatan Rakyat coalition, with PAS.

“So we can see that national opposition parties are relevant because Sabahans are looking beyond state parties.

“Also, we are talking about changing the present BN regime, and that change cannot only take place at the state level but must also happen at a federal level to be effective,” Liew said.

She said when PBS was in power and not part of the federal government, the party’s effectiveness was limited, as many matters came under the jurisdiction of the federal government.

“But I think what is important to remember is that PKR and DAP aren’t peninsula parties but national parties present at both state and national levels.”

So, Liew said, all “genuine” opposition parties like PKR, DAP and Warisan shouldn’t view each other as competition and should work together to bring change to Sabah.

She added that Pakatan Harapan was open to working with other opposition parties, but without naming names, noted that some parties seemed to be “too friendly” with the BN.

Aside from BN, Warisan and Pakatan Harapan, the other political force in the state is the United Sabah Alliance, a coalition comprising Parti Solidariti Tanah Airku (Sabah STAR), Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP), Parti Harapan Rakyat Sabah and Parti Perpaduan Rakyat Sabah (PPRS).

Liew also said that Sabah Pakatan Harapan leaders were “100%” Sabahans who had the interest of Sabahans at heart.

“There is no doubt a Pakatan Harapan-led federal government would fulfill the aspirations of Sabahans,” she said, highlighting how PKR president Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, in her policy speech at PKR’s 12th National Congress recently, had vowed to endorse and enhance the rights of Sabahans under the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63).

“She also said a Pakatan Harapan federal government would return full autonomy to Sabah, and take it a step further by ensuring good governance and transparency, because if we don’t have these then it’s not a meaningful autonomy for the people.”

Liew added that Wan Azizah’s policy speech will be part of Pakatan Harapan’s manifesto in the coming election (GE14).

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