



THE 1999 SABAH STATE ELECTIONS:

**A Vote for Continuity, Change,
and Development**



Lai Yew Meng



Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning
Universiti Malaysia Sabah

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and Development**

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**Universiti Malaysia Sabah
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Preface

Elections in the East Malaysian state of Sabah throughout the last decade or so have been nothing short of intrigue and excitement. Being profoundly eventful, volatile, and controversial, to say the least, elections in the state popularly known as "The Land Below the Wind" have drawn considerable attention and interest from various parties, not to mention, euphoria from its local communities. Most would agree that the seeds of controversy, which led to such growing interest and hype about Sabah politics, were sown during the landmark general elections of 1990. In the fateful polls, the Barisan Nasional (BN), in an unusual turn of events, lost the state government of Sabah when its coalition partner and ruling party, the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), crossed over at the "eleventh hour" to join the opposition front. Since the state elections had already been held a few months earlier, the BN had no choice but to concede Sabah to the opposition, not so much through electoral defeats, but through the contentious act of defection by its state coalition partner. A more bitter pill for the BN to swallow was the fact that it lost Sabah before polling even got started, because the PBS, whom the former entrusted with 14 of the 20 available parliamentary seats, committed the ultimate act of betrayal by opting to realign with the opposition *Gagasan Rakyat* after the nomination day, leaving the BN without any candidates to contest those seats.

Deemed as "a stab on the back", in the words of Prime Minister Mahathir himself, the BN vowed to redress the political *status quo* of Sabah in the next elections. After serving a term in unfamiliar territories as the state's opposition party, the BN retaliated by going all out to seize control of Sabah in the 1994 state polls, only to be humbled once more by an indomitable PBS. The slim victory of the PBS, however, was

short-lived when the BN allegedly engineered a shrewd post-election onslaught that resulted in the defection of several elected PBS assemblymen to the coalition. The dramatic turn of events altered the overall election results, which brought about the premature downfall of the PBS state government, less than a fortnight after being returned to power.

The state of play and controversies surrounding the previous parliamentary and state assembly elections have provided the setting for another exciting duel between the two protagonists of contemporary Sabah politics that was to be fought out in the 1999 Sabah State Elections. Not only was the event perceived by the PBS as a great opportunity to avenge the party's controversial defeat, but the 1999 state elections were also equally anticipated by observers as vital to its survival because another defeat would almost surely send one of Sabah's most popular parties in recent times into political doldrums. The elections were also important to the ruling BN in gauging its popularity and ability to win the hearts of the Sabahans during its first term in power. Furthermore, it would serve as a yardstick in judging whether the ruling coalition's strategy of developmental politics had augured well for the relatively ethnocentric local communities, specifically the Kadazandusuns and Muruts, who had thus far, remained loyal and rallied behind their local ethnic representatives in the PBS. The BN state government could certainly fortify its power by gaining a second consecutive term in office, and in the course, further undermine the comeback of its political foes.

The interest to undertake a study of the 1999 Sabah State Elections therefore arose from my observation that besides being a fascinating subject to study, this event was also worthy of research for its remarkable significance in shaping the present political landscape of Sabah as well as in charting the state's political future. It is noteworthy that Sabah politics today has, by and large, become more consistent with those of Peninsular

Malaysia. This is notably due to the return of the BN to a second consecutive term in power, which paves the way for the ruling coalition to reshape Sabah politics into something that is more coherent with those of the peninsular states, apart from strengthening the grasp of the federal government on state policies. Perhaps, more pertinent to this development is the burgeoning presence of the United Malays' National Organisation (UMNO) in Sabah politics since its introduction to the state's political scene, some twelve years back. In view of the fact that Malaysian politics has always been dominated by UMNO, which plays a hegemonic role within the BN, its introduction and subsequent consolidation as the undisputed senior coalition partner within the BN-Sabah framework has allowed the party to gain greater political leverage in the state, presumably at the expense of local political organisations. Indeed, UMNO's claim to hegemony within the BN-Sabah, and to a larger extent, the state's political setup, has been buttressed by its commanding performance in the 1999 state polls, which has undoubtedly overshadowed those of the local political parties within and outside the BN. The ascendancy of this predominantly peninsular-centred party, as most observers deduce, has opened the door for greater federal intervention that has altered the course and redefined the traditionally independent politics of this East Malaysian state to one that is more partial to federal influence.

I am aware that a case study of the Sabah State Elections could equally provide answers to some frequently asked questions on the conduct of "free and fair elections" in the country, apart from highlighting the ostensibly lopsided features of the electoral process that could be allegedly manipulated to the advantage of the government-in-power. Since it is the objective of this research project, among others, to look into the function of elections in Malaysia as well as the manner in which they are conducted, it is hoped that such a study can shed some light into these engaging issues. To do so, this research intends to

Sabah have been relatively consistent and similar. Therefore, the events that have transpired in those locations covered by the study are adequate to provide a relatively accurate overview of Sabah politics as it was played out during the polls.

This monograph actually arose from a research project that was initially proposed by Prof. P Ramasamy of the Political Science Department of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, who, then in early 1999, led a three-man research team to conduct a study of the 1999 Sabah State Elections. The project, nonetheless, never really took off apart from some preliminary fieldwork and data collection that were done during the couple of months leading to the polls. This was due to a series of unplanned commitments and other impediments faced by the team members, which had hindered and, ultimately stagnated the progress of the project. After allowing it to lay dormant for almost a year, I took the decision to revive the research project, not only to fulfill my interest on the subject, but also in view of the apparent lack of writings on the particular topic, even though the actual event drew enormous interests and euphoria from various parties. With the encouragement from family members and friends, and most crucial of all, new funding from Universiti Malaysia Sabah, I undertook the task to complete this study, which I believe, will be of interest to Sabahans and all Malaysians who savour the continuous presence of a free and just electoral system in their beloved country that in many ways, represent the soul of its democratic existence.

Firstly, I would like to duly acknowledge the contributions of Prof. P Ramasamy, and my colleague and friend, Anantha Raman Govindasamy of Universiti Malaysia Sabah, whom I have had the pleasure of working with during the initial stage of the project until the team's premature end due to the unforeseen circumstances mentioned above. Their constructive and beefy suggestions have immeasurably helped me to

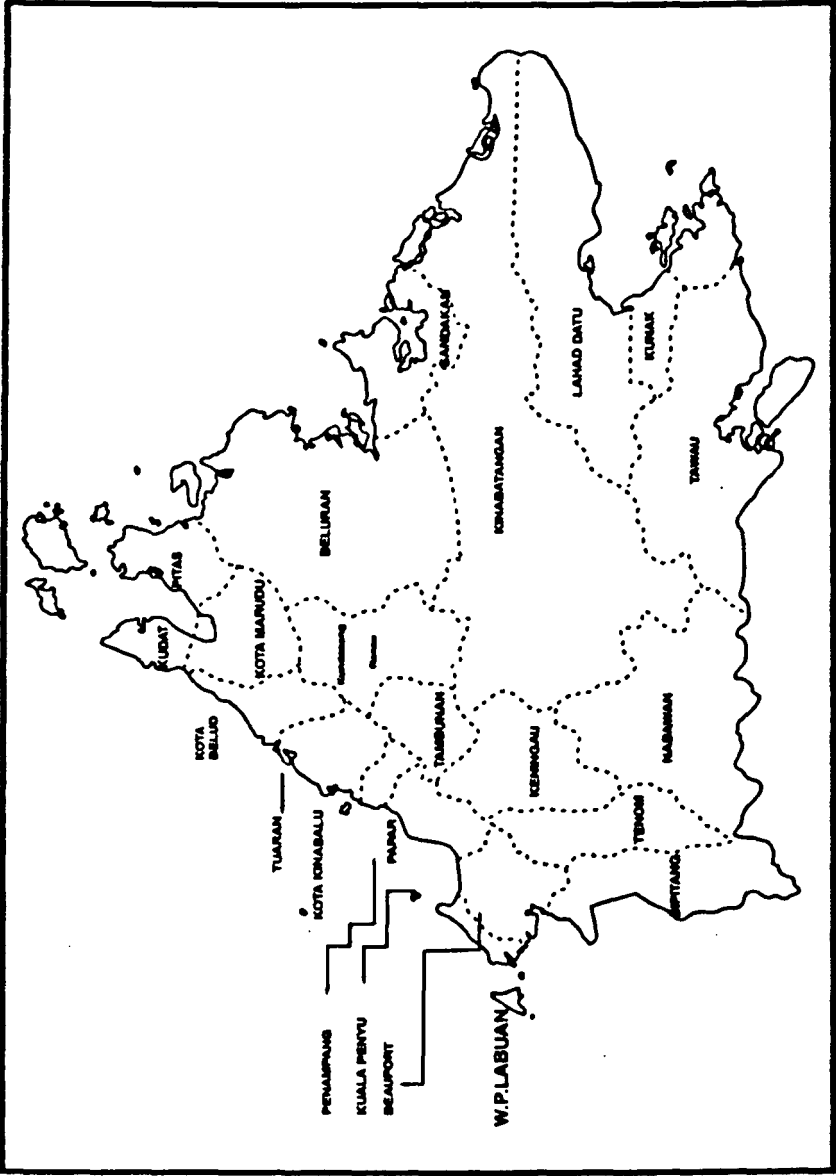
identify the objectives and the scope of the study. Similarly, the initial views and experience of Prof. Ramasamy proved insightful in the eventual writing of this monograph. I would also like to thank the numerous politicians and party workers for their valuable time and cooperation, and for furnishing me with the raw statistical data of the election that has immensely helped me in presenting a more astute analysis of the event. I am also indebted to Universiti Malaysia Sabah for providing me with the funding I required, under the varsity's Young Researchers' Scheme, to undertake this project. My gratitude goes to the Vice-Chancellor and the senior academic staff of the university who have constantly encouraged, supported, and guided young, aspiring researchers like me to keep on producing research and publications of respectable quality. I would like to acknowledge the valuable comments and criticisms from colleagues of other institutions of learning at the 7th Biennial International Conference of the Borneo Research Council (BRC) where a selected part of the monograph was presented. My heartfelt thanks also goes to Prof. Sabihah Osman of Universiti Malaysia Sabah and her research colleagues at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, namely Zaini Othman and Dr. Kamarulnizam Abdullah for allocating their precious time to review the manuscript. I have also to thank my colleagues at the Pusat Penataran Ilmu dan Bahasa, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, specifically Mdm. Sim Chee Cheang, Yuhana Mohd Yusof and Sanen Marshall for their assistance in editing the manuscript. Last but not least, my deepest gratitude to my parents, my younger sister, and Maureen for their endless love, sacrifice and support that have given me courage and strength to undertake the endeavours that life has to offer.

This monograph is by no means an exhaustive study of the 1999 Sabah State Elections, given the fact that there are several areas of the study that can be further explored to generate future academic research on various aspects and

issues pertaining to the political situation in Sabah. It is therefore hoped that this study may become the precursor to broader and more extensive research on the rich and colourful facets of contemporary Sabah politics.

Abbreviations

AKAR	Angkatan Keadilan Rakyat
APU	Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah
ARNS	Amanah Rakyat Negeri Sabah
BERJAYA	Parti Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah
Bersekutu	Parti Barisan Rakyat Sabah Bersekutu
BN	Barisan Nasional
DAP	Democratic Action Party
KeADILan	Parti Keadilan Nasional
LDP	Liberal Democratic Party
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia
PASOK	Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Pasok Nunukragang Bersatu
PBS	Parti Bersatu Sabah
PBRS	Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah
PDS	Parti Demokratik Sabah
PDSB	Parti Demokratik Sabah Bersatu
PETRONAS	Petroleum Nasional Berhad
SAPP	Sabah Progressive Party
SETIA	Parti Demokratik Setiahati Kuasa Rakyat Bersatu Sabah
UMNO	United Malays' National Organisation
USNO	United Sabah National Organisation



MAP OF SABAH