

## **Lahad Datu Standoff and Its Impacts on the GE13 Results in Sabah**

### **Abstract**

The so-called 'Lahad Datu Standoff' was a brief security crisis from early February 2013, when a group of several hundred rag-tag militiamen from Simunul and Tawi-Tawi islands in the neighboring southern Philippines who arrived by boats in Sabah and began occupying several villages. Proclaiming themselves as the 'Royal Army of the Sulu Sultanate', the gunmen represented the heirs of a long-defunct kingdom, which once controlled the territory until the late nineteenth century. The self-proclaimed Sultan of Sulu, Jamalul Kiram III, who was directing the militant incursion, insisted that Sabah was rightfully part of his kingdom. While engaging police in several firefights, the insurgents beheaded and mutilated several captured Malaysian security personnel, prompting Malaysian forces to deploy fighter jets in a successful operation to flush out the intruders. According to media reports, individuals in the highest levels of the Malaysian government were suspicious of a conspiracy, especially considering the highly unusual timing of the Sulu operation, which was so close to elections in both Malaysia and the Philippines. Najib Razak, the Malaysian Prime Minister, expressed concern that the Lahad Datu crisis would negatively affect the ongoing status of Sabah as a Barisan Nasional (BN) 'fixed-deposit' state for votes. Meanwhile, the opposition leaders had been increasingly successful in highlighting local issues such as marginalisation in national development initiatives, Sabah's oil royalty, corruption among local UMNO leaders, illegal immigrants, dissatisfaction on federal-states relations and the integrity of election process. Nevertheless, despite the crisis in Lahad Datu and the success of opposition leaders in highlighting local issues, Sabah (and Sarawak) once again became the key determinants of who forms the majority in the Malaysian parliament. Specifically, BN won 22 of 25 parliamentary seats in Sabah (and 25 of 31 parliamentary seats in Sarawak). Analysing various sources such as books, journals, newspapers and blogs, this paper will argue that the Lahad Datu standoff was the Barisan Nasional's 'lifesaver' in Sabah.