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## **The Rise and Fall of Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) in Sabah, Malaysia**

**Oshin Binti Sangkar<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** Sabah is one of the states in Malaysia that has a unique political development after the formation of the country. Unlike other states that were ruled by a national party known as Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu or United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Sabah was initially governed by the state's local political parties founded by the people of Sabah themselves. One of the local political parties that ruled Sabah was Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS). PBS is a party that was often involved with controversies during its reign as the state government. The rule of the PBS state government received a different reaction not only among the Sabah people, but also among the federal government leaders. Hence, this article examines the political development and situation of Sabah's political arena under PBS from 1985 to 1994. The article specifically observes the establishment and development of PBS in defeating the previous ruling party, Parti Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah or Sabah People's United Front (BERJAYA), and focuses on the reasons for the establishment of PBS as a new party in the political arena of Sabah in 1985. Moreover, the rise of PBS as a national party and its eventual collapse as the ruling party of Sabah's state government will also be analysed.

**Keywords:** Sabah, Malaysia, Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), Barisan Nasional (BN), United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Parti Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah (BERJAYA).

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## Introduction

Sabah is one of the 13 states in Malaysia and it is located in the northern part of Borneo. Its land borders with the Malaysian state of Sarawak and Indonesia's Kalimantan region. Sabah's capital city is Kota Kinabalu, which is also its biggest city. There are 33 indigenous groups in Sabah who communicate in more than 50 languages and 80 ethnic dialects. "Kadazan-Dusun" is the largest ethnic group in Sabah and forms almost 30% of the total population. Sabah is famously known for its tourism and rich natural resources. Among the attractions of the state is Mount Kinabalu, which is the highest point of Sabah as well as of Malaysia. The state has long mountain ranges on the west side, which forms parts of the Crocker Range National Park. Kinabatangan River, which is considered as the second longest river in Malaysia, also runs through the land of Sabah (Sabah State Government, 2021).

In 1961, the Prime Minister of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman, proposed the formation of an independent country known as Malaysia (Oh, 1967). This country would consist of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, Sabah and Brunei Darussalam (Selamat, 2016). The proposal shocked many people as it was never previously discussed with the states involved. Moreover, this proposal was obstructed by Indonesia and Philippines and, thus, this issue created conflicts with both countries (Osman, 2008). Nevertheless, the idea of this formation remained and it was set in motion. However, Brunei Darussalam withdrew from the formation at the last minute. On September 16, 1963, the Federation of Malaysia was established with the union of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak. Eventually, on August 9, 1965, Singapore was separated from Malaysia due to several horrendous conflicts that escalated to racial riots (Selamat, 2016).

Malaysia practises a system of democracy that is based on the federation system in which the federal government is led by the Prime Minister. Under this system, each state surrenders part of its power to be administered by the federal government, as stated in the Federal Constitution. For example, financial, defense, education, foreign affairs and many other matters will be under the power of the federal government. However, there are matters that are still under the power of the state. Moreover, Malaysia also practises a constitutional monarchy, whereby Malaysia has a king who is referred to as His Majesty the Yang

Di-Pertuan Agong. At the national level, His Majesty the King is one of the hereditary Rulers of the nine states and the Conference of Rulers. These hereditary Malay Rulers have the power to safeguard the customs and traditions of the Malays and handle the administration of Islamic affairs in each state (Pejabat Penyimpan Mohor Besar Raja-Raja, 2021).

Unlike other states that have their own king, His Majesty the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong is the Head of Islam for states that do not have a king, such as Penang, Malacca, Sabah, Sarawak and the Federal Territories. His Majesty the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong also holds the position of the Supreme Commander for the Malaysian Armed Forces. In contrast to the monarchy system that is usually practised by many monarchy countries, His Majesty the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong does not have absolute power because his power is subjected to the Constitution and he may only act under the advice of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. Meanwhile, at the state level, the hereditary Rulers are still the Heads of State and may carry out their duties according to the advice of their respective Chief Minister. In the case of Sabah, the head of the state government is the Chief Minister, who is chosen by the majority of the State Legislative Assembly and appointed officially by the Yang di-Pertua Negeri (Governor). Hence, the Chief Minister is the Head of the State Cabinet (Parliament of Malaysia, 2021).

Osman (2008) claimed that even though Sabah joined the Federation of Malaysia, unlike the other states in the Malay Peninsula, it was specially ruled by the state's local party. Since the formation of Malaysia in 1963, Sabah's local political party has been ruling the state government under the coalition of Barisan Nasional or National Front (BN). However, the political landscape changed when the national political party known as Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu or United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) became the ruling party in 1994 after successfully defeating Parti Bersatu Sabah or Sabah United Party (PBS), which was the former ruling party of the state (Osman, 2008).

### **The Political History of Sabah**

Sabah—which was previously known as North Borneo—was under the British rule, specifically the British North Borneo Chartered Company, from 1879 to 1941. Japan successfully occupied Sabah in 1941 when

World War II erupted, causing the British to lose its power over the state. However, Sabah was once again colonised by the British in July 1946, when the Japanese surrendered to the Allied powers and ended World War II. From then, Sabah became a British crown colony until the formation of Malaysia in 1963. Malaya's Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, proposed the formation of Malaysia, which consisted of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei territories, in 1961 during a conference in Singapore (Tze Ken, 2015). This proposal shocked many parties, especially Sabah, because it had never been discussed with the leaders from the respected state. Hence, the British established a commission to observe the reactions of the people of Sabah regarding this matter. As a result, two-thirds of the majority accepted this proposal with conditions (20-Point Agreement), while one-third of the people did not agree with the idea (Osman, 2008).

Nevertheless, the idea for the formation of Malaysia was successful and North Borneo managed to gain its independence and change its name to Sabah. The newly established country, Malaysia, can be considered as one of the countries that practises the politics of ethnicity (Hashmi & Majeed, 2015). This can be seen in Malaysia's politics, where most of the political parties in the country practise ethnic-based politics. The internal structure of both the state and the federal governments plays a major role in the development of ethnic-based politics. The unequal distribution of resources, social gains and opportunities to rise and survive are among the factors that lead to the politicisation of ethnicity by any party. This has been practised long before the formation of Malaysia, especially in the Malay Peninsula. A 2014 study by Idris and Mohamad found that the multi-ethnic society in the country led to the establishment of political parties that are based on ethnicity, such as the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). However, these three political parties were united under a notable coalition in Malaya known as Parti Perikatan, which was later formally changed to Barisan Nasional (BN). Hence, it is not surprising that this ethnic-based politics has also been practised in the political arena of Sabah, especially since the state is populated with a multi-ethnic society. According to Osman (2008), the ethnic-based political parties are Sabah Chinese Association (SCA), United Pasok Momogun Kadazan Dusun Organisation (UPKO) and Sabah United Party (PBS), where the majority of the party members are



Kadazan Dusun, Murut and many other ethnic groups. Hence, ethnic-based politics is not something new in the political arena of Sabah.

Ever since Sabah gained independence with the formation of Malaysia, the state government has been ruled by a local party founded by the people of Sabah. There were several local political parties that ruled Sabah from 1963 to 1985 before PBS took over power as the ruling party. Among the local political parties that previously ruled Sabah were United Sabah National Organisation (USNO), United Kadazan National Organisation (UNKO), United Pasok Momogun Kadazan Dusun Murut Organisation (UPKO), Sabah Chinese Association (SCA) and Sabah Indian Congress (Osman, 2008). However, the political situation in Sabah at that time was unstable, causing these local parties to rule for a short period of time. There were only two parties that managed to rule Sabah for more than five years—USNO-SCA Alliance from 1967 to 1976, and Sabah People's United Front (BERJAYA) from 1976 to 1985—both of which were under BN.

In the beginning, Sabah's political atmosphere was unstable due to the power struggle between the two main leaders of Sabah, namely Donald Stephen from UPKO and Datu Mustapha Datu Harun from USNO. The situation worsened when issues of discrimination were raised, causing these local parties to not be able to rule the multi-ethnic and multi-religious state for a long period of time (Ongkili, 2003). The dispute affected the relationship between the ethnic groups in Sabah, causing the intervention of the federal government in the political crisis of the state. Nevertheless, the intervention of the federal government in Sabah's state affairs later created uneasiness and prejudices among the Kadazandusun leaders and the community towards the federal government (Yusof, 1999). During the rule of USNO-SCA (also called the Alliance party), the state government increased pressure by not only demanding for greater autonomy of the state, but also threatening to withdraw Sabah from Malaysia if the federal government does not grant any of the state's demands. According to Osman (1992), this situation led to the establishment of Parti Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah (BERJAYA), a new multi-racial political party led by Donald Stephens (Fuad Stephens), Harris Salleh and Peter Mojuntin on July 15, 1975.

This new party successfully won 28 out of the 48 seats contested in the 1976 state election, defeating USNO and ultimately reducing

tensions with the federal government. After their win, Donald Stephens was appointed as the new Chief Minister of Sabah on April 15, 1976. However, his position was later replaced by Harris Salleh. Under the leadership of Harris Salleh, the relationship between the state government and federal government became cordial. Later on, the year of 1985 witnessed the rise of a new local party known as Parti Bersatu Sabah or United Sabah Party (PBS), challenging BERJAYA to become the new state government. This party received tremendous support from indigenous groups, especially the Kadazan Dusun and Murut, which are the two largest ethnic groups in Sabah. This newly founded political party managed to defeat BERJAYA led by Harris Salleh, and set up the new state government of Sabah after winning the state election in 1985 (Yusoff, 2001).

### **The Rise and Development of PBS in Sabah**

According to a study by Yusoff (2001), PBS was founded in March 1985, before the 1985 Sabah state election, and the founder of this party was Tan Sri Datuk Seri Panglima Joseph Pairin Kitingan (henceforth known as Pairin). One of the reasons behind the establishment of this party was the act of firing Tan Sri Datuk Seri Panglima Joseph Pairin Kitingan as a state minister and the decision of the state government to downgrade Tambunan as a district after BERJAYA lost to Tan Sri Datuk Seri Panglima Joseph Pairin Kitingan in the 1985 state election (Osman, 2008). This act consequentially offended Sabah's indigenous groups because Tan Sri Datuk Seri Panglima Joseph Pairin Kitingan was seen as a respected leader by them (Bagang & Puyok, 2021).

After Tan Sri Datuk Seri Panglima Joseph Pairin Kitingan won the election in Tambunan, he then confidently decided to form a new party (PBS) because the majority of the Kadazan and Chinese population were unhappy with the BERJAYA state government, especially on the issues of Islamisation and illegal immigrants in Sabah (Osman, 2008). Islam as a religion has increased in followers from 37.9% in 1960 to 65.4% in 2010. This statistic shows that there is somewhat an increasing number of Muslims in Sabah ever since the formation of Malaysia (Adnan, 2013). Furthermore, the PBS leaders accused the state government under BERJAYA of doing nothing regarding the issue of Filipinos immigrants in Sabah. Even though these Filipino immigrants,

most of whom were Muslim refugees, stayed in the state for only a short period of time, they were already granted Malaysian citizenship. The report saw an increase in the number of illegal immigrants in Sabah, from 80,000 under the USNO state government in 1976 to over 300,000 in 1985 under the BERJAYA state government (Yusoff, 2001). As a result, the public was extremely frustrated with the state government and scared that these Filipino immigrants will expand Sabah's Muslim population. These sensitive issues created tension, especially with the indigenous groups of Sabah who are mostly non-Muslim.

In addition, PBS party also rose in prominence due to discrimination against Sabah's other indigenous groups, especially the Kadazan. The establishment of PBS party was to fight for the rights of indigenous groups, especially after the former Chief Minister, Harris Salleh, combined all ethnic Bumiputra, including those of Filipino and Indonesian descent, in the native category in the 1980 Census (Osman, 2008). This action was considered as one of the ways for the BERJAYA's government to eliminate certain ethnic identities, which offended the people of Sabah, especially the Kadazan Dusun and Murut. Moreover, the leader of the BERJAYA state government also strongly promoted Malay influence in Sabah. Harris Salleh weakened the Kadazan Dusun influence by categorising all ethnic groups in Sabah into one ethnic label known as pribumi (indigenous group) to replace various tribal identifications in the state (Puyok, 2011). As a result, many ethnics groups, especially the Kadazan Dusun, were upset as it was seen as a means to eradicate their ethnic identity.

Another reason for the establishment of PBS was the different views held by the party as opposed to those of the leaders of BERJAYA, especially regarding the issue of Labuan in 1984, where the chief minister decided to give Labuan—one of the territories of Sabah that is rich with oil—to the federal government. Furthermore, BERJAYA state government also gave excessive emphasis on developing urban areas while neglecting rural areas, which caused the people of Sabah to fight for development in rural areas as well. As a result, PBS participated in the 1985 state election and won 25 seats, while USNO managed to win 16 seats and BERJAYA only managed to win six seats. However, PBS's victory in the election caused the 1986 Sabah riots, also known as the Silent Riot, which occurred in major towns of Sabah, such as Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan and Tawau. The reason behind this riot was due to

the dissatisfaction of the other parties, especially BERJAYA and USNO, towards PBS for winning the 1985 state election. As a result, the federal government decided to hold a re-election in 1986. Subsequently, the 1986 state election witnessed even a bigger victory for PBS as it won a majority of 34 seats, which was nine more than in the previous election, while USNO only managed to get 12 seats (Osman, 2008).

As a result, BERJAYA—which was supported by the federal government and previously controlled the Sabah state government—lost its power dramatically to the newly established party. PBS's victory in winning the majority of the seats saw the emergence of a non-Malay, non-Muslim state government that was not part of the BN coalition. Nevertheless, the PBS leaders later decided to join BN after winning the state election in 1986 to prevent another riot. However, the leader of PBS, Pairin, and the federal leaders, especially the then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, did not have a good relationship (Osman, 2008).

### **The Fall of PBS in Sabah**

During the reign of PBS as the ruling party of the Sabah state government, the PBS leaders tried to solve the problems faced by the Sabah people and the fought for the rights of Sabahans by demanding an increase from 5% to 20% of the oil royalty from the federal government (Kok-Wah, 1996). The PBS government also demanded that Labuan should be returned to Sabah as it was previously part of the state. The leaders believed that Sabah deserved to get an increase in the oil royalty because it is one of the states that is rich with oil and has significantly contributed to the oil and gas industry. Therefore, the leaders wanted to use this opportunity to upgrade the economic sector and further develop Sabah. In addition, as the ruling party of Sabah, PBS also demanded the implementation of the Borneonisation policy for all federal posts in Sabah. This is to ensure that the Sabah people would have a better chance and opportunity to hold a high position in federal posts in Sabah. Moreover, the state government also asked the federal government to review the Internal Security Act (ISA) and demanded that Sabah has its own radio stations and television network (Osman, 2008).

Other demands of the Sabah state government were requesting the federal government to control the issue of illegal immigrants, especially

those from the Philippines and Indonesia who came to Sabah without proper documentation (Yusoff, 2001). Putschueary (1985) claimed that the state government demanded that the federal government should take action by sending these immigrants back to their respective countries to control the situation. The new state government believed that the influx of the illegal immigrants should be controlled in order to secure not only job opportunities for the Sabah people but also the state's security. Yusoff (2001) stated that in July 1988, the state government decided to implement a new immigration policy whereby all foreigners who entered Sabah without valid travel documents will be deported back to their respective countries. This action, however, caused the anger of the federal government because the policy was implemented without its consultation.

In contrast to the Sabah state government's demands, the federal leaders decided not to return Labuan to Sabah and, instead, stated the benefits of turning Labuan into an offshore financial centre. The federal government also insisted that an increase in oil revenues specifically for Sabah would only serve the interests of Sabah and this would not be fair to other states that do not have such valuable natural resources. Consequentially, the federal government accused PBS as Sabah's new ruling party of fanning "anti-federal" sentiments in response to the state government's demands for greater state autonomy (Yusoff, 2001). When the federal government did not seem to grant any of PBS's demands, the party decided to pull out from the BN coalition five days before the 1990 state election (Osman, 2008). The party used a famous slogan—*Sabah untuk orang Sabah* or "Sabah for Sabah people"—during this election to gain support from the people. This slogan was considered as being anti-federal, anti-Malay Peninsula and even anti-Islam. Therefore, the federal government considered PBS's decision as a backstabbing act.

Regardless, PBS received immense support from the Sabah people and successfully won a majority of 32 seats in the election, while USNO under the coalition of BN only won 12 seats. As a result, PBS once again gained victory and became the ruling party of Sabah's state government. However, the victory of PBS in forming the state government led to the coming of UMNO as the national party in 1991. The coming of UMNO was one of the federal government's strategies to reclaim Sabah from the opposition party. UMNO had planned for this particular strategy to win back Sabah in time for the 1994 state election. Among its other

strategies under the BN coalition was the use of the slogan *Sabah Baru* or “New Sabah” and a few agendas promised for Sabah, especially on matters regarding school infrastructure, building a university and developing the economy of the state (Osman, 2008).

As tensions between the federal and the state governments intensified, Sabah’s Chief Minister Pairin unexpectedly dissolved the State Legislative Assembly on January 10, 1994, a week before a scheduled verdict on charges that he had violated his power by granting a contract for the construction of two-storey shop-houses to a business allegedly owned by one of his relatives. With the verdict of his corruption trial about to be revealed, Pairin calculated that he could count on a sympathy vote from ordinary Sabah people. The court found him guilty of wrongdoing, but he did not have to resign as Chief Minister because the judge’s fine of RM1,800 was less than the RM2,000 minimum necessary to eliminate him from office (Yusoff, 2001).

In a blow to Pairin’s intentions, the BN coalition got a huge boost shortly after the State Legislative Assembly was dissolved when Yong Teck Lee, PBS’s then-Vice President and State Minister for Industrial Development, declared that he was leaving PBS and established a new faction called the Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP). At a press conference, Yong stressed the importance of unity between the state and federal governments in order to reintegrate Sabah into the national development process. He said that if PBS was re-elected, the Chinese business class, which accounted for 70% of Sabah’s economy, would actually face more burdens. Following its formation, the leaders of SAPP and BN had a series of meetings. Anwar Ibrahim, the then-Deputy Prime Minister, declared in Kota Kinabalu on February 4 1994 (three days before nomination day) that the newly created SAPP has been admitted into BN and would contest in the state elections on BN’s ticket (Yusoff, 2001).

While Yong defected to BN, Tun Mustapha, a long-time hero of the Sabah Malay-Muslims, resigned as federal Minister for Sabah Affairs and declared his support for PBS. Mustapha’s defection was to show his support towards PBS in the 1994 state elections. This move was supposed to give PBS a significant portion of the Muslim vote that would have otherwise gone to UMNO in Sabah, given the party’s strong public standing in the state (Yusoff, 2001). As stated by Bagang and Puyok

(2021), PBS was projected to win the election as a result of this growth by the vote-pulling forces of Pairin, the widely respected *Huguan Siou* (Paramount leader) of the Kadazan.

The majority of the Sabah people still supported PBS in the 1994 state election, where once again the party won the election with 25 seats, while BN managed to win 23 seats (Osman, 2008). It was evident that PBS's performance was poor compared to the 1990 election in which it secured 36 seats. PBS received 49.5% of the vote (compared to 53.9% in 1990), the BN coalition received 46% and the remaining votes went to candidates from minor parties or independents. The Chinese vote swung the election in favour of BN. Yong Teck Lee secured a comfortable majority in his Likas electorate, as did two other Chinese ex-PBS assemblymen who ran for election in Sabah's east coast. After the results were announced, the chief minister's swearing-in ceremony was delayed for 36 hours because the Yang di-Pertua Negeri (Governor of Sabah), who had been appointed by the federal government, appeared to be ill and unwilling to see Pairin. Pairin waited at the palace gates, claiming that he wanted to avoid a repetition of the humiliating incident in 1985. Pairin was then sworn in on February 21, 1994, after a declaration was created that had been signed by all of PBS's winning candidates and contained their promises of allegiance to the party (Yusoff, 2001).

However, before the PBS-led government could settle into power, the UMNO-led opposition soon promoted defections from PBS by providing numerous offers. As a result, three PBS assemblymen defected to BN within two weeks. These allegations were refuted by UMNO Secretary-General, Mohamed Rahmat, who said that several PBS Supreme Council members defected because they lost faith in the party's leadership "due to the poor election results: they were leaving the PBS for the betterment of their people and not for selfish interests". Pairin agreed to call new elections and urged the Yang di-Pertua Negeri to dissolve the Assembly (which was yet to convene) to avoid further defections, but the Yang di-Pertua Negeri declined, insisting that because BN now had the numbers, it should be given the chance to form a government (Yusoff, 2001).

On March 14, 1994, Pairin's younger brother, Jeffrey, who had recently been released from prison but was still facing corruption allegations, crossed over to UMNO's side. Jeffrey insisted that his

decision was inspired solely by a desire to improve relationships with the federal government in Kuala Lumpur and had little to do with his political aspirations. He also expressed his desire “to see more local involvement in the federal machinery and more support devoted to Sabah” (Yusoff, 2001). Three weeks after the election, six members of the State Legislative Assembly left PBS to join UMNO (Osman, 2008). The act of party hopping by these six members of the State Legislative Assembly resulted in PBS’s loss of its majority seats. According to Osman (2008), on March 17, 1994, Pairin Kitingan and PBS were forced to step down from the state government because BN now had the majority seats. Hence, this marked the end of Sabah’s ruled by local party (Chin, 2014).

The 1999 state election witnessed the increasing popularity of UMNO under the BN coalition, as BN won 31 out of 48 seats (Osman, 2008). As a result, PBS decided to re-join the BN coalition in 2000 after seeing the dominance of BN in Sabah. This situation shows that sometimes the interests between the local people of Sabah and the federal government clash with one another, causing the state-federal relations to become strained. In addition, the ethnic-based political system is not an easy matter to manage by the state government, especially in creating unity at the state level, when Sabah is home to numerous ethnic groups. Hence, in many historical stages, Sabah’s local political parties would find themselves joining the BN coalition once again.

## **Conclusion**

Ever since Sabah gained its independence, the state’s political development has been greatly influenced by the leaders, ethnicity and popularity of its political parties and the relationship between the state government and federal government. The fate of any party will be based on the manifesto it offers to the people of Sabah during elections. A party that is able to give the best manifesto will have a greater opportunity to win elections. However, if the particular party is unable to fulfil or deliver its manifesto to the people, it will lead to its downfall in the following elections. In the case of PBS, the party gained prominence due to its sensitive sentiments to issues of Islamisation, ethnicity, discrimination and many more that were created by the previous ruling party, BERJAYA.



Such issues negatively affected the Sabah people's confidence in BERJAYA and led to their change in support to other parties, particularly PBS. Henceforth, PBS managed to become the ruling party of Sabah for nine years, from 1985 to 1994. However, due to PBS's demands towards the federal government, especially regarding the sensitive issues of Labuan, Borneonisation policy, oil royalty and many more, tensions occurred between the state and federal governments, which later contributed to the fall of PBS in 1994. Consequently, Sabah's political tension gave UMNO the opportunity to enter the state's political arena, and it eventually ruled the state until 2018. Subsequently, it indirectly forced PBS to re-join the BN coalition in 2000 as a component party due to BN's dominance in the political arena of Sabah.

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