

**ETHNICITY, CULTURE AND INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP IN MODERN POLITICS:
THE CASE OF THE KADAZANDUSUN IN SABAH, EAST MALAYSIA**



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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of the study was to examine the role of ethnic identity, culture and indigenous leadership institution in shaping the political change of the Kadazandusun. Drawing from the framework of ethnic factor in Malaysia's politics, the examination of the three inter-related issues was complemented by a survey conducted among 200 Kadazandusun in Penampang, Ranau and Tambunan. The findings suggest that ethnic identity remains a crucial component in the political change of the Kadazandusun. The Kadazandusun political elites not only use the identity issue as a "bargaining tool", they also use it to raise ethnic sentiment to win popular support. A majority of the Kadazandusun surveyed in the study believed that the identity issue has been used for political mileage and that is it time for the Kadazandusun leaders to solve the issue once and for all. All the Kadazandusun-based cultural associations remain an important "grassroots base" for the Kadazandusun political elites. The respondents believed that the Kadazandusun political leaders are not united and should be blamed for causing the Kadazandusun to split. Joseph Pairin Kitingan is still seen as the prominent figure who is capable of uniting the Kadazandusun. Even though his status as *Huguan Siou* is relevant to some Kadazandusun, some of the respondents wanted Pairin not to use his *Huguan Siou* title for political expediency and would prefer the indigenous leadership institution to remain "traditional".

Keywords: Kadazandusun, Joseph Pairin Kitingan, *Huguan Siou*, Kadazandusun Cultural Association (KDCA), Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS)

1.0. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's politics is undeniably influenced by the ethnic factor. Scholars have devoted much time studying how the different ethnic groups participate in the country's political process. Political parties are normally formed along the ethnic lines and this is evident if one looks at the major parties such as UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) (Abraham 2003). The UMNO was formed to provide the platform for the Malays to exert their political control; the MCA was the first political vehicle for the Chinese; and the MIC, was used by the Indians to pursue their communal interests. These ethnic-based parties have agreed to subscribe to "consociational political arrangement" to ensure political stability (Crouch 1996). Even though DAP (Democratic Action Party) and GERAKAN (*Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia*) have persistently claimed themselves to be multi-racial parties, the large number of Chinese members in the two parties suggest otherwise. Having said the above, most, if not all, of the political parties in Malaysia have remained ethnic-based as the ethnic sentiment is not only powerful but effective in aggregating mass support (Blondel 1996 & Chandra 2003). In Sabah and Sarawak, the pattern remains the same. The only difference is that the electorate has the opportunity to support political parties that do not necessarily subscribe to strong communal sentiment. A case in point is BERJAYA (*Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah*) that ruled Sabah from 1976 until 1985 and PBS (Parti Bersatu Sabah) in 1985 until 1994 (Han 1979, p. 379-389 & Luping 1994). Even though BERJAYA was led by a Muslim, it managed to maintain its multi-racial outlook. The PBS Government, whose constitution is modelled on BERJAYA's, was also multi-racial with a Kadazandusun as its leader. Multi-racial politics in Sabah was affected following UMNO's entry in 1991. This was as a result of the political dichotomy of Muslim versus non-Muslim imposed by UMNO with the blessing of the Federal Government (Chin 1999, p. 20-40).

As mentioned, the main feature of Malaysia's politics since independence is ethnic politics. Ethnic politics, however, is conceived differently in Sabah which is more heterogeneous compared to Peninsular Malaysia. In Sabah, ethnic politics involves the ever-changing ethnic identity which is determined more by political than cultural or natural forces (Reid 1997, p. 120-136 & Stephen 2000, p. 1-22). A case in point is the Kadazandusun. The decision by the Kadazandusun leaders to combine the ethnic name "Dusun" and "Kadazan" into one called "Kadazandusun" was not only aimed at resolving the conflict between the two culturally similar ethnic groups, it was also aimed at uniting the indigenous people of Sabah. At the outset, the PBS had the advantage because the large bulk of its support came from the indigenous people. Apart from ethnic identity, the KDCA (Kadazandusun Cultural Association) has also played an important role in the Kadazandusun political change. Even though the main function of the KDCA is to promote Kadazandusun