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THE 2008 MALAYSIAN GENERAL ELECTIONS IN SABAH: LOOKING BEYOND THE “PENINSULAR FACTOR”

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ABSTRACT

The 2008 Malaysian General Election saw the BN (Barisan Nasional or National Front) returned to power with less than a two-thirds majority. It has been observed that this is BN's worst electoral outing since 1969. The situation is rather different in Sabah, one of the thirteen states in Malaysia, in which BN managed to almost making a clean sweep and thus denying the opposition any chance to making inroads. Even though it was initially observed that the opposition led by PKR (Parti Keadilan Rakyat) could deny BN a major victory in Sabah, the election results indicate otherwise. At the outset, a major portion of the electorate in Sabah has renewed its support to BN, following the trend in 2004. The article argues that the tide of the “Peninsular factor” (i.e. the combined personality factor of Anwar and Mahathir and other contentious issues in the Peninsular Malaysia) give little impact on Sabah politics. It explains why the voters in Sabah give their support to BN and why they have abandoned the opposition.

INTRODUCTION

Election process is often associated with democracy and its absence, for some, means no or low level of democratic process. That is why democracy in Malaysia has always been associated with the regular conduct of an election after an alternate of five years (Crouch, 1996, p. 114-135; Jomo, 1996, p. 90-113). Since 1969, the ruling BN has managed to secure power with a two-thirds majority in the parliament. Two-thirds for the BN means a strong government capable of amending the Federal Constitution. Under the fourth prime minister Mahathir Mohamad's reign, he ensured the BN secure a two-thirds majority using whatever ways and means—including the use of the three Ms—media, machinery and money (Loh, 2003, p. 228-252). Even in 1999, at the height of the Anwar saga, Mahathir still managed to cling to power with a two-thirds majority—thanks to his shrewd manipulation of the three Ms. Mahathir's protégé Abdullah Ahmad Badawi continued giving BN a two-thirds majority in 2004 when he won the general election with a convincing more than 60 per cent of the popular votes.

Under Abdullah's tenure, he initiated a number of policies which observers say are not more than an attempt to undo Mahathir's previous policies. This included the cancellation of major projects such as the crooked bridge linking Johor causeway and Singapore, and the modern double railway that would link Johor and Padang Besar in Peninsular Malaysia. True to his promise to deal with

corruption head-on, Abdullah ordered the arrests of two high-profile public figures. Mahathir was obviously unhappy as he seemed to think that Abdullah was out to destroy his legacy. In less than a full term of Abdullah's tenure, Mahathir rose to become his "number one" critic. The BN under Abdullah entered the 2008 polls precariously, knowing that the Mahathir factor could become decisive in influencing the voting pattern particularly in Peninsular Malaysia. Abdullah was more worried about Mahathir than he was on Anwar's rise. As a consequence, the Mahathir and Anwar factor did play a major role in BN's failure to obtain a two-thirds majority in the parliament (Welsh, 2008a).

The 2008 general election is indeed interesting due to two main reasons. The election will become a litmus test for Abdullah's popularity amid the growing dissatisfaction to his leadership generated by the Mahathir camp and by some section of the disgruntled society as shown by the showdown staged by HINDRAFT (an Indian-based NGO group) in downtown Kuala Lumpur. It will also provide the avenue for all to see whether Anwar's political comeback will be accepted by the electorate.

Even though the opposition managed to make inroads in Peninsular Malaysia, it is entirely a different case in Sabah and Sarawak. In Sabah, the BN managed to win all except one state seat in Sri Tanjong and one parliamentary seat in Kota Kinabalu (Suruhanjaya Pilihanraya Malaysia, 2008). Despite the strong indication that the voters would vote for the opposition as claimed by the opposition leaders, the election results indicate yet once again that the issues in Peninsular Malaysia have little or no impact at all on local politics¹. In Sarawak, the situation is almost the same as in Sabah where the opposition only managed to retain the Bandar Kuching parliamentary seat (Suruhanjaya Pilihanraya Malaysia, 2008). The power structure built by the chief minister Abdul Taib Mahmud has ensured the BN's incumbency in Sarawak since 1981. Sabah and Sarawak continued their role as power brokers in the BN. In 2004, of the 198 seats that the BN won, Sarawak contributed the highest number of seats (27), followed by Johor 26 and Sabah 24.

The electorate in the five states in Peninsula Malaysia—Kedah, Kelantan, Penang, Selangor and Perak—rejected the BN while in Sabah and Sarawak the BN was returned to power win a massive win. Despite its experience as a former stronghold of the opposition, Sabah made everyone surprise by maintaining its status as a bastion for the BN. The article explains why the voters in Sabah abandoned the opposition and why they preferred to vote for the BN despite the allegations that the BN has neglected or has made no serious attempt to address local issues such as the illegal immigrant problem and regional economic imbalance.

RUN UP TO THE POLLS

Sabah politics, as in 2004, receives little attention compared to Peninsular Malaysia. This is due to the fact that Sabah does not have strong opposition in its legislative assembly and the lack of issues that could strongly attract the attention of its population. Due to this scenario, some in Sabah tried to bring in "opposition politics" that has been long absence in the state. This purported movement to change the course of Sabah politics was led by none other than Jeffrey Kitingan, the younger brother of PBS president Joseph Pairin. Jeffrey launched his political comeback in a truly dramatic fashion in Tambunan during which the Tambunan Declaration was announced. The Declaration among other things, sought to return the rights of Sabahans such as the right to more oil royalty

greater representation in the federal cabinet and civil service. Jeffrey also launched his new book titled "Justice for Sabah" in which his regionalist calls are articulated in details. For some, Jeffrey's decision to choose Tambunan is because he wanted to imitate Pairin's rise in 1985 after Tambunan was abrogated from its district status by the BERJAYA Government. The incidence in Tambunan paved the way for Pairin to form PBS which later took control of Sabah politics until its downfall in 1994. Jeffrey chose PKR as his new party platform because he said the party was sympathetic to the Sabah problems and that it was willing to help Sabah PKR realises its political aspiration.

Prior to the election, much of the campaign launched by Jeffrey revolved around the alleged economic monopoly and malpractices of the Musa administration (Welsh 2008). More than 80 police reports were lodged by Jeffrey, alleging Musa's misuse of power as Sabah's chief minister (Malaysia Today, 2008). There was also this perceived internal problems within Sabah UMNO which was manipulated to the fullest by PKR. Despite the virulent attacks on his leadership, Musa chose not to retaliate and claimed that the allegations made against him were baseless. Musa also faced another setback when one of his deputies, the LDP president, Chong Kah Kiat, resigned from the state cabinet after a fallout with him over the Ma Tzu statue issue.² This prompted some to speculate that the BN might lose the crucial Chinese voters which have been long regarded as "kingmakers" in Sabah politics.

Despite the presence of PKR and internal political squabble within the state BN ranks, the BN was set to win without any major challenge. The PKR and its close ally DAP appeared to be at loggerheads over seats allocation. The election saw 807,862 eligible voters of which 13,414 or about 1.7 per cent was postal voters.

PARTIES AND CANDIDATES CONTESTING

Lobbying was intense for both the BN and opposition. The PKR contested in 21 parliamentary and 60 parliamentary seats after failing to reach a desirable solution with DAP (Democratic Action Party) to form a pact. It, however, left two seats – Merotai and Sukau to PAS (Parti Islam SeMalaysia). The DAP decided to contest five parliamentary and 10 state seats. The DAP blamed the PKR for failing to reach an agreement despite many rounds of talks held in Kota Kinabalu and Kuala Lumpur. The tussle for seats between the two opposition parties was obvious in Kota Kinabalu. Despite calls for both parties to set aside their differences and allow either one candidate to contest, the Kota Kinabalu parliamentary seat saw a four-cornered fight involving an independent candidate, PBS, DAP and PKR. BERSEKUTU (Parti Barisan Rakyat Sabah Bersekutu) fielded its candidates in two parliamentary and 16 state seats. The number of independent candidates increased to 18 from 13 in 2004 at the parliamentary level while at the state level, a total of 57 candidates contested.

In the BN, there were uncertainties as to whether the coalition party would be weakened as a result of the dropping of several senior leaders such as former assembly speaker Pandikar Amin Mulia and former chief minister Salleh Said Keruak and former state minister Amirkahar Mustapha. In response to his exclusion from the BN's list, Pandikar said he "felt sorry" if the decision was taken due to cronyism and personal interest (*The Borneo Post*, February 22, 2008). Another senior leader, the SAPP president, Yong Teck Lee was also not included in the list despite his intense lobbying. Yong said the Kota Kinabalu seat should be given to SAPP because it is the hardest to be

won and that he was confident in winning it. Some speculated their exclusion from the BN's list was partly attributed to Musa's strategy to get rid of dissenters in Sabah BN. But the decision of Pandikar and Salleh to offer the olive branch showed that being at loggerheads with Musa at this moment was not a viable option for them (*Daily Express*, February 24, 2008). The BN applied almost the same formula as in 2004, contesting in 25 parliamentary and 60 state seats.

CAMPAIGN AND ISSUES

If the presence of posters and banners are anything to go by, the psychological war had already been won by the BN in Sabah. In Ranau, the BN's posters and banners clearly outnumbered that of the opposition's (*Daily Express*, March 1, 2008). Another example was in the interior area of Mendulong in Sipitang where the opposition's posters were nowhere to be seen compared with the BN's.³ The poster war clearly showed that the BN had the upper hand in terms of election machinery while the opposition had to depend on limited finances to operate its campaign.

As during the previous elections, the BN was banking on the development rhetoric in its campaigns by bringing forward the slogan of "Peace, Safe and Progress". The BN's campaign boasted the achievement of prime minister Abdullah in the last four years which included Malaysia's economic achievement as reflected by the growth in GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of 8 per cent from RM427 million to RM504 billion as well as the setting up several commissions such as the Royal Commission to Enhance the Operation and Management of the Police. The BN reported that over 85 per cent of the Commission's proposal had been implemented (*The Borneo Post*, February 26, 2008; *The Borneo Post*, March 7, 2008). In Sabah, the people were reminded of the government's seriousness in developing the state through the establishment of Sabah Development Corridor (SDC) which promised Sabahans that 900,000 jobs would be created for them, involving an investment of RM105 billion in the next 18 years. The BN also presented a progress report of the State BN from 2004-2007 (*Daily Express*, February 27, 2008; *The Borneo Post*, March 7, 2008).

The same old tactic of providing on-the-spot grant was also employed by the BN (Puyok 2007, p. 64-79). During Musa's visit to the interior area of Sipitang, he officiated the launching of the new cultural centre of the Lundayeh community. He even gave RM100, 000 to the Sabah Lundayeh Cultural Association.⁴ Some in the community charged that this is clearly an attempt to win the votes of the Lundayeh people who have been long known as strong supporter to the opposition (anonymous, pers. comm., June 13, 2008).

Another instance was in Kota Marudu where the incumbent Maximus Ongkili (BN-PBS) gave RM250 each to 93 pupils of *Sekolah Kebangsaan Mangaris* through the Education Ministry's *Kumpulan Wang Amanah Pelajar Termiskin* (KWAPM or Poor Students Trust Group) (*The Borneo Post*, March 7, 2008). Even though Maximus refuted the opposition's claim that the fund was used as a campaign tool, a source claimed that the fund had been misused by the former for political expediency (anonymous, pers. comm., March 10, 2008). It appeared that the fund was also distributed in Nabawan by Keningau UMNO chief Abdul Ghani Mohd Yassin, involving 233 and 188 pupils respectively in two schools—*Sekolah Kebangsaan Kampung Bahagia* and *Sekolah Kebangsaan Binakan* in Sook (*Daily Express*, March 7, 2008).

Nationally, the DAP campaigned along the tagline “Just Change It” in which it promised to give a bonus up to RM6000 per family for households earning RM6000 or less per annum. The money spent on the bonus would be taken from Petronas’ profit of RM70 billion. The DAP also promised to ensure adequate water supply and a provision to mobilise 100,000 police personnel to patrol the streets to reduce the number of rising criminal cases. The PKR’s manifesto, “A New Dawn for Malaysia”, aimed “to end race-based discrimination policies, lower fuel prices and fight corruption” (*The Borneo Post*, February 27, 2009). In Sabah, the PKR and DAP took the BN to task by claiming that under the BN, the people’s NCR (Native Customary Right) lands are completely wiped out after the BN amended the Sabah Land Ordinance (*Daily Express*, March 7, 2008). The DAP went on by saying that “land-grabbing” in Sabah was at its worst” (*Daily Express*, February 27, 2008). The PKR promised to preserve the natives’ rights while the DAP vowed to return the NCR lands to the people who have been occupying them for generation (*Daily Express*, February 27, 2008).

In Kadazandusun areas, the opposition played out the “Wind of Change” slogan, asking the voters to “*tukaron bangkad*” (change the shirt— meaning to change their support from BN to the opposition). This was particularly evident in rural areas such as in Keningau (*Daily Express*, March 2, 2008). The opposition also questioned Pairin’s effectiveness in voicing out the people’s problems. In one instance, Mozes Iking of PKR claimed that Pairin was no longer needed by the Kadazandusun community (*Daily Express*, March 7, 2008). The opposition believed that the Kadazandusun were not happy with the BN and especially PBS whom they have long supported since the party’s inception in 1985. For some, the PBS’s role as “champion” of the Kadazandusun people was no longer felt as Pairin was considered as a “BN man” who is now singing a different tune (Welsh, 2008). Jeffry, who was challenging Pairin in Keningau even went to the offensive by saying that it is time for Pairin to quit as “he is now sounding more like the UMNO leaders when he is telling his own people that the development will stop if they do not vote for BN”. The message that the opposition was trying to convey was that it is time for Pairin to concentrate on his role as the cultural leader of the Kadazandusun in his capacity as *Huguan Siou* and president of KDCA.

There was also this issue of the PBS reneging on its promise to retain all of the party’s 13 state and four parliamentary incumbents. Pairin said he decided to retain the incumbents as he did not want to “rock the boat” (*Daily Express*, February 22, 2008). However, at the eleventh hour during nomination, Pairin made a surprise move by dropping the incumbent for Matunggong Jornah Mozihim despite offering her an appointment letter to contest earlier. Pairin was believed to have been advised by his deputy Maximus not to field Jornah as her supporters in Matunggong had supported the then independent candidate in the 2004 general election. In the battle to wrest the parliamentary seat of Kota Marudu which consisted of Matunggong and Tandek, the independent candidate Anthony Mandiau managed to collect well more than 7000 thousand votes believed to be mainly from Matunggong. Many see Maximus’ action as an attempt to “punish” Jornah for failing to deliver the votes from Matunggong (*Daily Express*, March 7, 2008).

In Chinese areas, both the BN and opposition campaigned along the same issue of promising to provide better environment for investments. The BN said political stability would ensure more investments to come into the state and benefit the Chinese community. The issue of Chinese education also came into the picture. In one instance, the BN candidate for Kota Kinabalu urged the voters to vote for him as he was a former student of a Chinese school. The opposition hit back, saying that the issue must not be used for political mileage (*New Sabah Times*, March 5, 2008).

Attention had been focused on several Chinese hot seats such as Sandakan, Tawau, Likas, Kota Kinabalu, Api-Api and Luyang. In Sandakan, eyebrows were raised as to why the LDP new president V.K. Liew was fielded there when many knew that he is a newcomer in politics and the fact that the seat has been traditionally held by DAP. In 2004, the LDP candidate Lau Ngew Siew was defeated by the independent candidate Chong Hon Min with a majority vote of 1330. Some were with the opinion that Liew's candidacy in Sandakan was part of the plan to topple LDP and to end the political career of its former president Chong Kah Kiat. The allegation is not entirely unfounded as Chong himself said that he knew there were certain people in BN who wanted to sabotage the election in order to see the downfall of LDP "for the third time since 1999" (*Daily Express*, March 7, 2008). The conspiracy to topple LDP also spread to other area. Chong claimed that there was a group of people who was telling the voters to vote for one of the independent candidates instead of the LDP candidate in Tanjong Kapor. Despite the invitation to join the opposition, Chong remained with the BN and urged the Chinese community to vote for the BN as it has brought about many changes in Sabah (*Daily Express*, March 4, 2008).

RESULTS

At the national level, the BN suffered a major setback since 1969 after failing to retain its two-thirds majority win. The BN even failed to obtain a majority of popular votes cast in Peninsular Malaysia. It only obtained 49 per cent of the popular votes cast compared to the opposition 51 per cent (Asian Strategic Leadership Institute, 2008). Of all the 140 seats the BN won, 54 came from Sabah and Sarawak. So without the contribution of Sabah and Sarawak, the BN would not have obtained a simple majority. The opposition also managed to increase its seats in the parliament from 12 previously to 82 this time around. The BN, however, won impressively in Sabah and Sarawak. Of all the 25 parliamentary and 60 state seats contested in Sabah, the BN won 24 and 59 respectively. In Sarawak, the opposition was clearly decimated where it only won one seat in its stronghold in Bandar Kuching compared to the BN 30 seats.

For analytical purposes, we shall divide all the contested parliamentary and state seats in Sabah into three broad categories namely Kadazandusun (or non-Muslim *Bumiputera*), Chinese, *Muslim Bumiputera* and mixed areas. From there, we shall analyse the performances of the parties contesting with respect to the popular votes cast and the number of seats won. Where necessary, a comparison with the results in 2004 is also made.

Kadazandusun Areas

The BN won all the six parliamentary seats in Kadazandusun areas including in Pensiangan where it was won uncontested by Joseph Kurup (BN-PBRS). In terms of popular votes, the BN obtained 58.68 per cent compared to the combined opposition votes 36.40 per cent. Both the BN and opposition had their share of popular votes dropped by 1.2 and 3.71 per cent respectively (Table 2). The BN component parties of PBS and UPKO shared the number of popular votes at 24.55 per cent and 25.33 per cent respectively while UMNO only 8.79 per cent. In 2004, PBS obtained 59.88 per cent while the opposition and independents combined obtained 40.11 per cent. The large bulk of the opposition votes went to PKR (35.02 per cent), followed by BERSEKUTU (0.86 per cent) and DAP (0.51 per cent). The remaining 4.91 per cent went to the independent candidates.

At the state level, the BN won all the 13 Kadazandusun seats, collecting about 59.81 per cent of the popular votes compared to the opposition combined, 34.56 per cent (Table 3). In 2004, the BN obtained 57.88 per cent of the popular votes while the opposition 42.09 per cent. At the individual party level, the PKR managed to collect about 33.59 per cent compared to the PBS 32.91 per cent. The share of the votes obtained by UPKO and PBRs is just 17.54 per cent and 4.82 per cent respectively. Interestingly, the opposition could have denied the BN a huge majority in a number of areas had it successful in persuading the independent candidates not to contest. For example in Tandek, the combined votes of the PKR candidate with that of the independent's and BERSEKUTU's could have reduced the BN's majority to just 245. In Bingkor, Jeffrey could have won the seat had the independent chosen not to contest. The BN's majority in Bingkor is only 122. In 2004, Jeffrey was almost able to wrest the seat from Kurup with a 143-vote difference.

The results show that the Kadazandusun voters did not totally reject the opposition's brand of politics which some quarters say as irrelevant to local people. But one cannot deny the fact that the Kadazandusun voters want local-based parties such as PBS and UPKO to represent them at the federal level. At the state level, the opposition performed slightly better on an individual party basis, looking at the number of popular votes it obtained (33.59 per cent) compared to the major BN Kadazandusun-based party, PBS, 32.01 per cent. This could be attributed to two reasons. First, many saw PBS as gradually losing its image as "champion" to the Kadazandusun and state rights. They might also want an opposition voice in the legislative assembly which the PBS and other state BN parties failed to provide. Second, Pairin's silence on a number of pressing local issues such as fake ICs and illegal immigrants since becoming a "BN man" (as the opposition called him) has slightly affected his reputation as *Huguan Siou* (Paramount Leader). Jeffrey's scathing attack on Pairin's character as well as his revelation of Musa's alleged corrupt practices might also contribute to the swing of the Kadazandusun votes.

All the BN Kadazandusun-based parties campaigned along the issues of development and continuity. The PBS chose to depart from its strong Kadazandusun outlook while UPKO emerged to become a "new" champion to the Kadazandusun community. The UPKO vowed to fight for the Kadazandusun rights as it is the only "pure" Kadazandusun party in the state. It even stated that it had "[stuck] its neck out" in speaking about the Kadazandusun problems in Sabah. The PBS, long associated with the Kadazandusun, chose to play "safe politics" as it has painful experience being in the opposition until it was re-admitted into BN in 2002. The PBRs's electoral strength particularly at the parliamentary level is generally untested because it won the Pensiangan seat uncontested. Despite the win, the PBRs president Joseph Kurup would have to face a lot of uncertainties ahead as there is a strong possibility that a by-election would be called in Pensiangan.⁵ Unlike in Pairin's and Dompok's case, Kurup had to choose the "hard way" to remain in power, that is, not to re-nominate the popular incumbent in Pensiangan Bernard Maraat whom he saw as the type of leader "who likes to work alone". At one time, Maraat vowed to contest as an independent but only to change his mind later. To say which among the Kadazandusun-based parties that is more popular among the Kadazandusun voters warrant another close observation but PBS has the advantage because many Kadazandusun still regard Pairin as a symbol of unity and strength due to his role as *Huguan Siou* and president of the Kadazandusun Cultural Association (KDCA) (Luping, 1984, p. 83-87).

Chinese Areas

The Chinese support for the opposition appeared to be strong in urban areas. The popular votes obtained by the opposition in the parliamentary seats of Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan is 57.41 per cent compared to the BN 35.62 per cent. Overall, the popular Chinese votes gained by the opposition saw an increase by 13.76 per cent (Table 2). Both the DAP and PKR candidate managed to defeat the BN candidate with a majority votes of more than 1000 and 900 respectively. Had the DAP, PKR and independent joined force to face the BN, they could trounce the BN candidate with well more than 10000 votes. The same scenario could be drawn in Sandakan which saw the LDP candidate facing a tough fight from the DAP and independent. Had the DAP and independent decided to contest as a single pact, they could have defeated the LDP with more than 2000 votes.

Even though the BN managed to win five of the six Chinese seats contested at the state level, the opposition's performance could not be underestimated. The PKR, for instance, managed to deny a big majority to the PBS candidate in Api-Api who obtained only 174 votes while in several areas the huge number of votes obtained by the opposition showed that the Chinese voters were generally unhappy with the BN and that they were looking for a different party platform to represent them. The total votes obtained by the BN at the state level is 53 per cent while the opposition 49.99 per cent (Table 3). Following the trend at the parliamentary level, the opposition votes at the state level also registered a significant increase of 18.91 per cent.

The opposition could have won another one parliamentary seat and two state seats had it chosen to contest one-on-one with the BN. The table below explains this possible scenario.

Table 1: The Possible Number of Votes Obtained by the Opposition Pact

Constituency	BN*			The opposition pact**	Majority
	SAPP	LDP	PBS		
Sandakan		8297		11050	2753
Likas	4097			5305	1208
Luyang	5073			6457	1384

* Actual number of votes

** Possible number of votes

Clearly, the Chinese voting pattern could be partly explained by the rational choice theory. Rational choice theorists hold that "voting decisions are based on cost-benefit analyses where voters match their individual issue preferences with party platforms" (Andersen & Heath, 2000, p. 3). The opposition's promise to abolish affirmative action policy and to provide equal economic opportunities to all Malaysian irrespective of race and religion might be appealing to the Chinese community. Other than that, the opposition's promise to reform the country and to tackle the high cost of living particularly in urban areas could also contribute to the swing of the Chinese votes. It appeared that the Chinese were not too concerned about the Ma Tzu issue because it was seen as a personal problem between Musa and Chong. Chong's decision to remain in the BN and to leave the matter to court to decide explains why some Chinese remain loyal to the BN. Had Chong decided to join the opposition, the voting pattern in the Chinese area could have seen a swing to the opposition.

Muslim Areas

The BN remained strong in the Muslim areas. It won all the 15 parliamentary seats contested (including the Kalabakan seat which was won uncontested) and obtained about 66.06 per cent of the popular votes compared to the opposition 27.25 per cent (Table 2). A major share of the Muslim votes went to UMNO 53.26 per cent, followed by PKR 24.12 per cent, and the independent candidates combined 6.67 per cent. The BN repeated the similar massive victory at the state level, winning all the 36 seats contested. The popular votes the BN obtained is 68.78 per cent while the opposition 27.58 per cent. Again, a major share of the popular votes went to UMNO 63.61 per cent while the PKR only managed to scrap through with 25.58 per cent. The Sabah UMNO really did a commendable job than its counterpart in Peninsular Malaysia which shared the number of popular votes with PAS and PKR combined at 35.5 per cent and 34.8 per cent respectively (Asian Strategic Leadership Institute, 2008).

Clearly, the Muslim electorate rejected the PKR as an alternative party to them. The tide of the Anwar factor in Peninsular Malaysia did not seem to give much impact. Despite the chorus of attacks on Musa's leadership and Sabah UMNO practising blatant cronyism, the Muslim electorate solidly backed Musa and gave BN a convincing win. Apart from the explanation above, the Muslim might not have any choice but to vote for the UMNO as there is no credible Muslim-backed party in Sabah. Even though there is speculation that a group of UMNO dissenters would form an alternative Muslim party, it remains just speculation. Musa was also quick to devise a plan to ensure his position in Sabah UMNO continues to be unchallenged. This included the awards of lucrative contracts to UMNO's divisional heads and those identified to be a threat to his leadership (Malaysia Today, 2008).

Another observation is that non-Muslim voters become the decisive factor in ensuring the victory to non-Muslim parties contesting in Muslim areas. For example in Putatan, Batu Sapi and Tawau parliamentary seats. Putatan has a significant number of Kadazandusun and Chinese voters (roughly 36.72 per cent) while Batu Sapi and Tawau have a substantial number of Chinese voters (37.33 per cent and 44.37 per cent respectively). These reinforce the claim once again that the Kadazandusun and Chinese voters outside the urban areas clearly rejected the opposition particularly the PKR. The same pattern is also obvious at the state level. Non-Muslim parties such as PBS and UPKO managed to wrest the Tanjung Aru and Kuala Penyu seats respectively. Tanjung Aru has strong Chinese population at 36.59 per cent while Kuala Penyu has a large number of Kadazandusun voters at 38.77 per cent.

Mixed Areas

A mixed area can be loosely described as an area where there is no one particular ethnic group commanding a population majority of more than 50 per cent. The BN obtained about 62.14 per cent of the votes in mixed areas compared to the opposition 36.27 per cent at the parliamentary level (Table 2). A major share of the popular votes went to UPKO and SAPP in Tuaran and Sepanggar respectively while PKR obtained about 29.59 per cent. While the battle in the parliamentary mixed seat is not as decisive, the situation is different at the state level. The opposition could have won in Inanam and Kapayan if DAP and PKR had not contested against each other. In Inanam, for instance, the combined votes of the DAP and PKR candidates could have easily toppled the BN's candidate

by well over than a thousand votes. In Kapayan, the opposition could have won the seat by a convincing majority of a thousand or so votes had it decided to contest one-on-one with the BN candidate. Overall, the BN obtained about 51.24 per cent of the popular votes while the opposition 40.69 per cent in all the mixed seats at state level. On an individual party basis, the PKR fared relatively well, obtaining about 27.18 per cent of the votes, followed by its counterpart DAP 13.28 per cent.

Table 2: Share of the Popular Votes According to Constituency Type at the Parliamentary Level

Constituency Type (Parliament)	Popular Vote (%)		Difference
	BN	Opposition	
<i>Kadazandusun</i> (non-Muslim Bumiputera)	58.68 (59.88)*	36.40 (40.11)	-1.2/-3.71
Chinese	35.62 (56.32)	27.25 (30.41)	-20.7/13.76
<i>Malay/Muslim</i> (Muslim Bumiputera)	66.06 (69.55)	27.25 (30.41)	-3.49/-3.16
Mixed	62.14 (70.63)	36.27 (29.35)	-8.49/6.92

Note: * The figures in bracket represent the popular votes obtained in 2004
 Source: various newspaper reports in *Daily Express* and *The Borneo Post* as well as reports from the Malaysian Election Commission
 (http://semak.spr.gov.my/spr/laporan/5_KeputusanKeseluruhan.php. Retrieved on June 12, 2008)

Table 3: Share of the Popular Votes According to Constituency Type at the State Level

Constituency Type (Parliament)	Popular Vote (%)		Difference
	BN	Opposition	
<i>Kadazandusun</i> (non-Muslim Bumiputera)	59.81 (59.88)*	34.56 (40.11)	-0.07/-5.55
Chinese	53 (68.91)	49.99 (31.08)	-15.91/18.91
<i>Malay/Muslim</i> (Muslim Bumiputera)	68.78 (66.26)	27.58 (33.73)	2.52/-6.15
Mixed	51.24 (70.63)	40.69 (n.a.)	-19.39/n.a.

Note: * The figures in bracket represent the popular votes obtained in 2004
 Source: various newspaper reports in *Daily Express* and *The Borneo Post* as well as reports from the Malaysian Election Commission
 (http://semak.spr.gov.my/spr/laporan/5_KeputusanKeseluruhan.php. Retrieved on June 12, 2008)

CONCLUSION

Based on the election results, we can draw a number of key points:

The election issue in Peninsular Malaysia gave little impact on local politics. For example, the issue of Abdullah's incompetence as prime minister, the economic slowdown, the rising cost of living and the tide of the Anwar factor. The voters in Sabah generally saw the BN as being a capable party in bringing much development to the state. The message of development that the BN was conveying seemed attractive to some, coupled with the old tactic of giving on-the-spot grants. Even though the opposition tried to project its image as a "new champion" to state rights, many were not convinced with its sincerity. Anwar, for example, was seen as a former UMNO leader who was instrumental in toppling down the PBS government in 1994 while Jeffrey was seen as not more than a political opportunist wanting to make a political comeback.⁶ Clearly, the voters did not want to gamble their voting right by choosing the opposition.

Sabah voters are generally parochial and that they still preferred local-based parties to represent them. This is particularly evident in Kadazandusun and Chinese areas. Had there been a strong local-based multiracial opposition party, the voters would have swung their votes from the BN. The Muslim community clearly had no choice but to back UMNO. The situation would have been different if there was an alternative local Muslim-based party in Sabah. But this would not happen for the time being as local UMNO leaders are already enjoying lucrative patronage from their counterparts in Kuala Lumpur although some are said to be unsatisfied with Musa's leadership.

The opposition's failure to form a formidable force also contributed to the BN's victory (Welsh, 2008a; *The Star*, March 10, 2008). From the analysis, we could see that the opposition could win at least two Chinese-majority parliamentary and state seats and another two mixed seats. Even though it would be impossible for the opposition in the form of PKR-DAP-PAS alliance to form a government in Sabah, at least, they could deny the BN a major victory had they chosen not to contest against each other in certain "opposition-prone" areas. Just before polling, their "marriage of convenience" had turned sour as a result of their squabble over seat allocation. Anwar's presence to ease the tension and to broker a deal proved to be futile when the issue remained unresolved until polling day (*The Borneo Post*, February 26, 2008).

Most importantly, Sabah politics in the years to come will remain polarised and could become a liability to its interethnic relations. A major share of the Kadazandusun votes went to the Kadazandusun-based PBS. Even though PBS has claimed itself as a multiracial party, the number of non-Kadazandusun seats it currently holds suggests otherwise. The fact that the PBS fails to expand its Chinese and Muslim representation only makes it more communal than multiracial. Another Kadazandusun-based party which strongly uses the ethnic Kadazandusun sentiment is UPKO. But unlike PBS, UPKO's grassroots support is marginally weaker. But it is possible for UPKO to take over from PBS as it is seriously now launching an aggressive campaign to recruit more Kadazandusun members—the latest being the launching of *Komulakan* (junior youth wing). Another Kadazandusun based party PBRS exists because of Joseph Kurup, who is battling to survive politically. In the electoral term, the PBRS remains a "mosquito party" and its appeal among the Kadazandusun is generally lower.

The large bulk of the Chinese votes went to the Chinese-based SAPP even though the opposition is slowly making inroads particularly in urban areas. In terms of political influence, the Chinese are clearly losing ground because they are “squeezed” between UMNO’s ambition to expand its Muslim territories and the Kadazandusun-based parties’ attempt to retain what is left for them. Meanwhile the Muslim support remains strong in UMNO. Unless there is an alternative Muslim-based party to challenge UMNO, Sabah UMNO will continue its strong grip on the Muslim support.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In a random interview, the voters in the Tenom constituency said they had nothing to lose if they vote for the opposition as many of the promises made by the BN during the (2004) general elections remained unfulfilled (Daily Express, February 17, 2008).
- ² The issue started when Musa ordered the construction of the Goddess of the Sea (Ma Tzu) statue in Chong’s constituency be stopped indefinitely. Musa said the construction of the religious statue was too close to the nearby Asy-Syakirin Mosque and therefore would potentially offend the Muslim community in the surrounding area. Musa’s action, it appeared, was related to the idence in Sipadan in which the Ministry of Tourism headed by Chong had objected to a development project approved by Musa’s Ministry of Finance. When the issue came to the prime minister’s attention, Musa was taken by surprise and hence his hostility to Chong (Daily Express, May 13, 2007).
- ³ The authors observed that the opposition’s posters were negligible during his visit to the area.
- ⁴ The figure has been confirmed by an insider who attended the function.
- ⁵ The opposition candidate who had been disqualified to contest in Pensiangan due to “technical reason” filed an election petition, challenging Kurup’s victory. He also claimed that his disqualification was the act of sabotage. When the result was announced by the EC officer, Kurup had to be whisked away from the nomination centre to avoid from being hurt by the angry crowd (Daily Express, February 26, 2008).
- ⁶ Based on a random interview conducted by the authors and the readers’ feedback published in major local newspapers.

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