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## What Issues Matter to Local Voters, and Why?: Electoral Politics in Ranau, Sabah

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### ABSTRACT

This research was an attempt to gauge the electorate's opinion on key electoral issues in Ranau, Sabah. It involved 712 respondents from the state constituencies of Kundasang, Paginatan and Karanaan. A survey questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale was distributed to the respondents. The respondents were asked on electoral issues ranging from primordial sentiments, personality politics, patronage politics, regional sentiments, development, economy and governance. The research theoretical framework is based on the sociological, psychological, and economic models of voting behaviour. The research found that race and religious considerations have less influence on the people's voting decisions and are unlikely to feature prominently in the upcoming elections. However, electoral issues based on regional sentiments related to Sabah's state of affairs remain very popular among the respondents. The politics of personality formed on the basis of patrimonial, cultural and patronage ties is also evident, suggesting that the role of the candidate is more important than the role of the party in influencing people's voting decisions. The ruling government is viewed less favourably on the issue of governance and economy, indicating that local and national issues are equally important in shaping Ranau's, and Sabah's political landscape.

**Keywords:** *Electoral politics, voting behavior, Kadazandusun, Ranau, Sabah*

### INTRODUCTION

Sabah is one of the states in the federation of Malaysia. It is known for its highly tolerant society and upbeat political environment. After the 2008 and 2013 general elections, Sabah rose to become an important state as its electoral support was crucial in ensuring the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional's (BN) victory. The electoral results in both elections show that despite the opposition's growing popularity in Peninsular Malaysia (or West Malaysia), the electorates in Sabah maintained their electoral support for BN. It is argued that "national"<sup>1</sup> issues that ranged from economic to political which were promoted by the opposition in Sabah have had less effect on the voters as they are more influenced by "local" issues such as "autonomy"<sup>2</sup>, state and indigenous rights, and state development (Chin & Puyok 2010, pp. 219-325). Given the salience of local issues, national-based parties such as the *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR or People's Justice Party) and the DAP (Democratic Action Party) have been trying to project themselves as a champion for Sabah. Their main challenge is to compete with local-based opposition parties led by leaders long known

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for their image as “Borneo nationalists”<sup>3</sup>. As national issues such as the 1MDB and 2.6 billion “donation” continue to attract public attention, pro opposition groups have been going on the offensive using these issues as their primary weapon to attack the BN. They seem to be successful in creating the perception that the government has some serious governance issues. As the next general elections loom, it is important to gauge the people’s responses to all the issues above and to infer on the influence of their responses towards the political landscape of Ranau and Sabah as a whole.

## BACKGROUND OF RANAU

Ranau is one of Sabah’s 25 parliamentary constituencies known for its booming tourism industry. It has a multicultural and multireligious population of 95,632 (Department of Statistics 2010). Ranau’s multiethnic population comprises the Kadazandusuns (the biggest group), Malays, Bajaus, Muruts, Chinese, Indian, and other Bumiputera (literally, “son of soil”) groups and non-Malaysian citizens who are mostly involved in plantation and agricultural activities. Islam (46.85%) is the largest religion in Ranau followed by Christianity (45.68%) (Department of Statistics 2010). Other religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism are also practised in Ranau, not to mention those (albeit in small numbers) who still believe in animistic beliefs. Places of worship built next to each other are a common feature in Ranau. Ranau is arguably one of the most racially-“fluid” and religiously-tolerant places in Malaysia. Masidi Manjun, a state senior minister was quoted as saying, “if you want to feel the essence of a multiracial, tolerant and peaceful community, Ranau is one of the best places” (Chan 2016). Politically, Ranau has been the BN’s stronghold since 2004. However, in 2013, despite winning the seat, the majority obtained by the BN candidate had dropped significantly. In fact, Jonathan Yassin, the candidate for PKR -- BN’s close competitor in Ranau - - had managed to increase his popular votes from 6,823 in 2008 to 11,823 in 2013<sup>4</sup>. Given Ranau’s diverse population composition, the BN’s declining popularity, and the emergence of new political players, Ranau remains a marginal seat that will be closely watched in the upcoming elections.

### *Concept of Voting Behaviour*

Voting behaviour is the people’s action when they are confronted with a political decision i.e. which party to vote for or whether to vote according to the party’s symbol or the individual who represents the party. Some of the central questions asked by political scientists studying voting behaviour are: Why do people vote the way they do? Why do voters vote for certain party/individual but not the other? What factors motivate people to vote (and not to)? Are there any differences in the people’s voting preferences according to their demographic profile and political leaning? What issues concern voters the most?

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<sup>1</sup> National issues here generally refer to issues that are often discussed and debated by West Malaysian media and politicians. The Goods Services Tax (GST), the 1MDB, the 2.6 billion donation, rising cost of living, the Anwar factor, the Allah issue and conflict among the Malays and non-Malays are all regarded as national issues that do not affect the voters in East Malaysia that much.

<sup>2</sup> Autonomy can mean different things to different people. For most in Sabah, it means a self-government and an autonomous territory without little or no control from the federal government. They are also those who think that autonomy should be seen from the context of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia that divides the state and federal power according to the State, Federal and Concurrent List.

<sup>3</sup> The competition has disunited the opposition as they have not been able to agree on a common policy platform and to avoid contesting against each other in the elections. In the 2008 and 2013 elections, for instance, following the failure of the opposition to agree on seats allocation, the PKR and DAP competed against with local parties SAPP (Sabah Action People’s Party) and STAR (then State Reform Party). The results were disastrous for the opposition as they failed to deny the BN’s two-thirds majority win.

<sup>4</sup> <http://undi.info/sabah/p/2013/P179>

### ***Models of Voting Behaviour***

The first model is the sociological model (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & McPhee 1954, cited in Sarlamanov & Jovanoski, 2014, pp. 16-24). The sociological model argues that the people's voting decision is influenced by their family, friends and by the media. In understanding how the people make their political decision, it is important to explore the question of how political ideas/values are transmitted to them – a process known as “political socialisation” (Almond & Verba 1963, cited in Sarlamanov & Jovanoski, 2014, pp. 16-24). The people's political decision can also be influenced by their family members such as parents influencing their children to support certain leaders/parties and by their friends through a political conversation. The media has a role, too, where the people's political attitude is shaped by political discussions/debates on the television, radio and other mediums. The second model of voting behaviour is the psychological model (Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes 1963 cited in Sarlamanov & Jovanoski, 2014, pp. 16-24). This model argues that the people's voting behaviour is mainly influenced by their party affiliation. A person who is a member of a certain political party, for instance, is inclined to vote for the party he has a long association with and whose ideology and aspiration are compatible with his. The third model of voting behaviour is the rational choice theory or also known as the economic model (Downs 1957, cited in Sarlamanov & Jovanoski, 2014, pp. 16-24). This model claims that the people's voting decision is determined by what they can gain from the party or individual they support. It has been argued that the rural voters in Malaysia, for instance, continue to vote for the BN as they can get the economic benefits from the ruling party by supporting it (Weiss & Puyok 2017).

### ***The Sabah Model***

The Sabah model draws upon the work of Puyok (with Chin 2010, pp. 219-325; with Bagang 2011, pp. 1-22; 2009, pp. 95-116; 2013a, pp. 181-195; and 2013b, pp. 226-237) who explores the saliency of primordial sentiments, personality and patronage politics, regional sentiments, and development and how these issues influence and shape the people's political attitude in Sabah. The model also includes governance and economy as additional variables. Primordial sentiments are related to the people's affinity towards certain racial and religious groups (Davidson 2008, pp. 199-226). It is argued that race and religion have strong emotional appeals that pull the people together (Davidson 2008, pp. 199-226; Hamayotsu 2008, pp. 171-198; Horowitz 1985). For instance, the Kadazandusuns' support for the Kadazandusun-based parties is driven by the belief that only these parties can fight for their rights and protect their cultural significance (Puyok & Bagang 2011, pp. 1-22). Similarly, the Malay-Muslim voters may be inclined to vote for either UMNO or PAS (Pan Islamic Party) because they are the only dominant parties that their supporters think capable of safeguarding the Malay and Islamic interests in Malaysia. Puyok (2013a, pp. 181-195) argued that some voters voted for the same leaders all over again because of their strong patrimonial, psychological, and cultural relationships with the leaders. In some instances, through propaganda, and coupled with the leaders' charisma, a personality cult was developed around them (Puyok 2013a, pp. 181-195).

Personality politics is closely related with patronage politics. The close relations that a voter has established with his leader is due to the leader's ability to provide political, economic and social support to the voter. Patronage politics is based on the concept of patron-client network, denoting the reciprocal relationship between a patron (the provider of support/giver of protection) and a client (the receiver of support/protection) (Scott 1972). Regional sentiments have its roots in regionalism or regional politics. It refers to the role of regional identity and regional issues in shaping the people's political attitude. In the context of Sabah, for instance, the people have strong affection towards their state that is historically, culturally and politically different from Peninsular Malaysia. Most hold the belief that Sabah is a neglected state in the federation of Malaysia partly because of the failure of the federal government to safeguard Sabah's autonomy and rights as agreed in the Malaysian Agreement. The “us” against “them” feelings have become so ingrained in the public sphere that a basic problem of political structure has turned into a full blown political issue.

## METHODS

This research was part of a statewide study to explore the voters' perception on key electoral issues in Sabah involving 9,600 respondents across 16 parliamentary and 40 state constituencies<sup>5</sup>. The constituencies were selected based on a set of characteristics: ethnic-type, socioeconomic background, geographical background, and other criteria unique to a particular constituency such as key local issues, background of incumbent, whether it is a rural or urban, and records of past election results. However, for this research, only the constituency of Ranau would be analysed. The research in Ranau involved 712 respondents from the state constituencies of Kundasang, Paginantan and Karanaan. The respondents were selected systematically based on their ethnic background, age, gender, educational attainment, and other key demographic variables. A questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale was distributed to the respondents. The respondents were asked whether they strongly disagree, disagree, not sure, agree or strongly agree to key electoral issues ranging from primordial sentiments, personality politics, patronage politics, regional sentiments, development, economy and governance.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Primordial sentiments*

Primordial sentiments seem to play a very insignificant role in the respondents' political choices. A majority of the respondents said that their political decisions are not duly influenced by racial (57.5%) and religious (66.9%) considerations. In responding to the Allah and *hudud* law issues, a majority said that the Allah conundrum (67.4%) and the *hudud* law (70%) do not influence their political choices. Even though 52.7 percent said that freedom of religion is still practiced in Malaysia, only 39.7 percent claimed that they were "comfortable" by the way religious conversion is happening in Sabah, showing that even in a highly tolerant society like Ranau, religious conversion is considered sensitive and should not be discussed openly. On whether Malaysia is an Islamic country, 41.6 percent said that it is not as opposed to those who responded in the affirmative (36.4%). The respondents' responses related to primordial sentiments based on race and religion seem to reflect Ranau's social diversity. Intermarriages are prevalent in Ranau and people are related to one another, socially and culturally. This explains why despite the popularity of race and religious issues in West Malaysia, it is not particularly so in Ranau.

### *Personality politics*

A majority of the respondents regarded the candidate's personality as important in determining their political choices (67.80%). They also said that their political choices are more influenced by the candidate than the party (43.4%). Nevertheless, a significant number claimed that national (37.7%) and local leaders (36.8%) have failed to emphasise with local issues. These findings seem to corroborate with Puyok (2013b) who argued that voters are more inclined to support the same leader due to the special relationship that they have cultivated with him. Personality politics revolve around the idea that a leader's personal traits are critical and significant to be able to connect with the local electorates. This personal traits may be compounded by the leader's historical or long linkage with the community as seen in the case of Joseph Pairin Kitingan, president of *Parti Bersatu Sabah* (Sabah United Party), for instance, who has established a special relationship with his supporters due to his role as *huguan siou* (paramount leader).

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<sup>5</sup> The research titled Electoral Dynamics in Sabah was sponsored by the National Council of Professors comprising a team of researchers from Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) and Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Sabah Campus.

### ***Patronage politics***

A majority of the respondents said that the culture of money politics (61.8%), cronyism (41.1%) and nepotism (43.1%) are rampant in Malaysia. Interestingly, even though the distribution of “BR1M” (*Bantuan Rakyat Satu Malaysia* or Malaysian People’s Assistance Scheme) has been regarded by some as a form of monetary inducement to gain political support, more than half (59.6%) said that it does not influence their political choices. Contrary to the general perception that political parties can provide access to economic opportunities, only 21.2% claimed that being a member of a political party would benefit them socioeconomically. In fact, a majority (64.7%) stated that even without the help of a political party, they could still go about their daily life. Based on these responses it can be argued that people show a certain level of political maturity, and the tactic of using monetary inducements to influence their propensity to vote for the dominant party does not seem to factor in this particular community. This brings us to the question of whether monetary inducements would still be a strategic method if only to garner local support and ultimately to win political support.

### ***Regional sentiments***

Regional sentiments among the respondents are strong. Forty-four (44.0%) percent said that Sabah has gradually lost its autonomy and wanted the Malaysian Agreement 1963 be reviewed (70.7%). A majority also agreed that key pre-Malaysia documents such as the 20-Point Memorandum (54%), the Inter-Governmental Committee Report (51.2%), and the Malaysian Agreement (57.4%) are important in ensuring harmonious federal-state relations. There were strong reactions from the respondents on perennial regional issues such as the illegal immigrants’ problem, oil royalty and “Borneonisation”<sup>6</sup>. On the problem of illegal immigrants, 62.3 percent said that the Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) formed to address the issue has failed to meet its objectives. They claimed that the present government has failed to solve the issue (65.7%) in as much as the problem remains basically the same as it was in the past years. On oil royalty, 70.3 percent regarded the five percent royalty from the federal government as “unreasonable” and believed that the present government lacks the political will to fight for the issue (49.6%). On Borneonisation, 51.3 percent of the respondents said that the number of heads of department in the federal service from Sabah does not reflect the contents of the pre-Malaysia agreements that promised to appoint Sabahans to key positions in the federal service.

A culmination of dissatisfaction coupled with anti-federal feelings flamed by political leaders led some to call for Sabah’s separation from the federation. The campaign calling for secession was led by a loose grouping called SSKM (*Sabah Sarawak Keluar Malaysia/Sabah Sarawak Secede from Malaysia*). In Ranau, the reactions towards the SSKM are mixed. Only 32.7 percent of the respondents said that it is reasonable as opposed to those who regarded the movement as unreasonable (30.7%) and those who were unsure (30.8%). According to one community leader in Bundu Tuhan, Ranau, the birth of the SSKM movement was due to the “dissatisfaction” of the people of Sabah towards the federal government whom they accused of failing to honour the Malaysian Agreement and of neglecting Sabah (community leader, pers. comm, 2/2/2016). Two points can be made out of the findings above. First, they reflect the strong anti-federal feelings throughout Ranau. Second, anti-federal feelings are more pronounced in the Kadazandusun areas (Puyok, 2009), and this particular study situated in Ranau also shows the same observation.

### ***Development***

Almost 50 percent (49.8%) of the respondents said that infrastructure development is an important agenda that has had effect on their voting decision. Fifty six percent (56.5%) were unsatisfied with the progress of infrastructure development and with the standard of public amenities in their areas. A majority (64.2%) agreed that there is a gap in the level of development between urban and rural areas. Even though, under

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<sup>6</sup> Borneonisation is one of the points included in the 20-Point Memorandum before the formation of Malaysia. It demanded the appointment of Sabahans to positions in the state federal service.

Najib, Sabah has received unprecedented amount of federal funding, many thought that it is still not enough as they are still many rural areas that are yet to be fully developed (56.8%). And despite Najib's persistent promise and assurance that Sabah will be "on par with other states" in Peninsular Malaysia, more than half of the respondents (56.1%) thought that Sabah is not Najib's priority (Geraldine 2017). According to a well-known political leader in Ranau, while the federal's "generosity" is commendable, it is important for the government to ensure that the spillover effects of the allocation are felt by the people through the delivery of their pressing needs such as roads, clean water supply, and schools (party leader, pers. comm., February 3, 2016). A significant number of the respondents (49.5%) said that the present government has failed to bring Sabah out of poverty (according to a statistics released by the World Bank in 2010, Sabah is one of the poorest states in Malaysia)<sup>7</sup>. On the issue of land, 68.8% said that land acquisition by the government is unreasonable even if it is meant for development. The respondents' general unhappiness towards development, in a way, measures the electorates' constant pressure to realise what has been promised earlier. Nonetheless, the electorates are also showing a more mature understanding of the kind of politics they have to deal with on a daily basis. What is said and shown is the idea that promises are not sufficient to reach a desired political support. What is more significant is the ability of the government of the day to ensure that there is an effective (and fair) delivery of development programmes intended for the local community. Development programmes that unite the community rather than disenfranchise other members of the political community.

### ***Economy***

For most respondents, the rising cost of living has put them in a very difficult economic position (72.7%). Sixty seven percent (67.3%) regarded the implementation of the GST as unreasonable and has placed a heavy burden on the people (68.4%). Even though the government has introduced a number of initiatives to alleviate the people's economic burden, 57.5 percent said that the initiatives have thus far failed to address their economic concerns. Rising cost of living as a result of the GST is real and will affect the people's political choices. Their unhappiness is further deepened by their suspicions about the government's alleged financial mismanagement, as highlighted both in mainstream and alternative media. Quantitative and qualitative insights on this issue also show a local community that is fully aware of the national issues confronting Malaysia in general and Sabah in particular. Even the case of the Sabah "Watergate"<sup>8</sup> has been part of their political conversation.

### ***Governance***

The respondents gave strong reactions against the way the government has dealt with the issues of governance. A majority claimed that the problem of corruption is the biggest issue that the country is currently facing (73.3%). A significant number (32.2%) also said that the public delivery system is unsatisfactory. More than half (52.3%) said that the people is not the priority of the present government and that it has also failed to lead with a sense of transparency, accountability and integrity. On the contentious 1MDB issue, 37 percent of the respondents said that they did not understand the issue as opposed to those who were not sure (25.3%) and those who understood it (24.8%). Fifty four percent said that the government has failed to address the issue. In a focus group discussion in Bundu Tuhan, many said that if the issue is not addressed well, it could influence the people's political choices (focus group discussion, Bundu Tuhan, February 6, 2016). Many were of the opinion that the 1MDB issue involves the "loss" of public money and

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<sup>7</sup> However, some have disputed the data saying that the World Bank poverty measurement was flawed as non-Malaysian citizens were included in the survey.

<sup>8</sup> On October 22, 2016, a raiding party led by the MACC (Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission) found RM45 million in cash in the office of the Sabah Water Department director. Another RM7.5 million was discovered in the house of the director's deputy. The MACC also discovered luxury cars, expensive watches and handbags, making the total amount seized to a staggering RM114 million -- the biggest in the MACC's history (*The Star Online*, 2016).

has put into question the government's credibility and accountability (community leader, pers. comm., 2/2/2016). On the 2.6 billion donation issue, 59.4 percent regarded the government's explanation as unacceptable and that the investigation into the issue was not done transparently (61%). Since the 1MDB has become part of the national discourse, local electorates have a mixed reaction to it. Apparently, despite using the print media and television networks to explain it, the people do not seem to buy the idea, as it may be too complicated to understand, or the economic jargons used were far from a layman's understanding. Or it may also be that the 1MDB came at a time when people have a low confidence about the prospects of a better economy. It should be noted that the opposition has been riding on the 1MDB scandal and this will remain so for as long as people are not satisfied in the way the government explains it. Over and above, national issues are no longer confined in West Malaysia. The advent of ICT and access to smartphones has facilitated the sharing of information especially political issues that directly and indirectly affect and influence people's attitude and behaviour.

## CONCLUSION

### *Making sense of the responses and influence on political landscape*

Scholars of Malaysia's electoral politics have studied the issue of voting from the ethnic and religious lenses (Davidson 2008, pp. 199-226; Puyok 2011). They have argued that the people's voting decisions are primarily driven by race and religious considerations. However, the research in Ranau shows that primordialism based on race and religion is not necessarily *the* factor that will influence the people's political choices. This will make Ranau a less attractive spot for proponents of primordial politics to win political support. And, with Ranau's multiracial and multireligious background, political players are set to face with conflicting and challenging demands from the electorates. Regionalism, following the trend statewide, is highly likely to have a significant influence on the people's voting decisions. The respondents' strong reactions against what they believed to be the "erosion" of Sabah's rights by the federal government coupled with the perceived development gap between the Peninsular and Sabah indicate the divisiveness of regional politics and the continuing popularity of the "Borneo Agenda" as a "saleable" political issue (Puyok 2015, pp. 199-220).

The BN-led government is currently battling the issue of perception following the rise of the 1MDB and 2.6 billion donation issues ("1MDB's bad image a perception issues", *Free Malaysia Today*, April 14, 2015). Some may not understand the issue from the financial point of view but they have been fed with the idea that the issue involves a "loss" of public fund and the government's lack of financial accountability. The people dissatisfaction (and suspicion) is further deepened with the rising cost of living and the implementation of the GST. With the continuing popularity of the issues and the opposition going on to the offensive in attacking the government on the 1MDB-related questions, the 1MDB, the 2.6 billion donation, and a host of other economic issues will not simply disappear but certainly be among the key electoral issues that will affect the people's political choices in the next elections.

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