

A Defining Role for a New Malaysia Forgone?

There has never been so much written on and researched about an election in Sabah. The chapters of this book deal with the many issues that have bedeviled Sabah politics from the time of its entry into Malaysia. The former Warisan Plus government infused the campaign with a style reminiscent of the freshness that the late Adenan Satem brought into Sarawak's politics. It also rekindled hopes of a 'second coming' for the New Malaysia touted by Pakatan Harapan during the 2018 General Election, and its short time in government. The chapters are a good read on the dynamics of Sabah politics and provide pointers, perhaps, on why the new dawn of Sabah politics may not yet see the light of day any time soon!

Illegal immigration, which has been billed as the mother of all problems in Sabah during previous elections, reared its ugly head in Sabah politics soon after the declaration of independence and the formation of Malaysia. Robust politicking especially involving the Muslim and non-Muslim Bumiputeras generated policies which changed the demography of the state. Clandestinely implemented by officials either at the behest of the government, or at least its acquiescence, these moves have been, uncharacteristically for a government policy initiative, a roaring success.

The numerous elections held for both Parliament and the state assembly have failed to produce any fixed solution to the immigration issue. A Royal Commission of Inquiry was set up to look into this but until today nothing of significance has been undertaken to address the issue. It calls for sincerity and seriousness on the part of the governments and pragmatism from amongst Sabahans adversely affected by the influx of illegal immigrants, many of whom have now secured citizenship through dubious means.

Perhaps a Truth and Reconciliation Commission can be considered to facilitate a national healing and a lasting solution. The government and

perpetrators of a redefined Sabah demography can own up to their actions. Sabah can accept its fair share of the immigrants with the rest distributed between the other states. As an assurance of its commitment to racial and religious harmony, the state government can take steps to return to the constitutional provisions as of Malaysia Day 1963. Sabah then did not have an official religion. With the immigration issue out of the way, the state can then focus on strengthening its economy and the eradication of poverty.

The strong presence of Kuala Lumpur has continued to exert its influence on the outcome of elections in Sabah, as well as on the composition of the ensuing government. The fight for power at the centre has spilled over to the states and it does appear that this will be a feature of Malaysian politics for some time to come. Sadly, this will divert the attention of winning parties away from the business of providing good governance – as the eyes of the victorious will be trained towards another victory in the next battle. For Sabah, the overdependence of state leaders on political support from Kuala Lumpur will compromise the pursuit of states' rights, which were a very significant part of the election campaign.

The perennial issues of Sabah politics are thriving. The same issues will flow seamlessly into the elections ahead. What is interesting to note is that the natives of Malaysia from the third largest island in the world are articulating issues openly. In the past, the loud voices in the debate were from the non-Muslim communities but today the Muslim Bumiputera are also at the forefront demanding state rights and articulating the need to steer the country towards building a nation for all Malaysians. Perhaps herein lie the pointers for the search of the lost soul of the nation. Can Malaysian Borneo rise to the occasion? Doesn't the Sun rise from the East!

Bernard Giluk Dompok

Chief Minister of Sabah 1998-1999