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The 16th Sabah State Election: Kadazandusun Politics and the *Huguan Siou* Factor

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Abstract

This article analyses the 16th Sabah State Election, focusing on the Kadazandusun-majority seats. It is based on an ethnographic study comprising interviews with candidates and casual conversations with local people in "competitive" Kadazandusun seats such as Matunggong, Kiulu, Moyog, Tambunan, Keningau, Sook, Nabawan, Tenom and Melalap. The results of the election showed that the Kadazandusun voted for status quo. In addition, following the trend of GE14, the Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) managed to maintain its strong presence in the Kadazandusun areas. This article argues that ethnic and personality politics play an instrumental role in determining the Kadazandusun support to GRS particularly STAR (*Parti Solidariti Tanah Airku Rakyat Sabah*/Homeland Solidarity Party) and PBS (*Parti Bersatu Sabah*/Sabah United Party). While economic factors are decisive as well, the role of the Kadazandusun traditional leadership institution is pertinent in influencing the people's decision to vote.

Keywords: 16th Sabah State Election, Huguan Siou, Kadazandusun

Introduction

After ruling the country for more than 60 years, Barisan Nasional (BN) was defeated by Pakatan Harapan (PH) in the "unprecedented" 2018 General Election (GE14). Political pundits have used various terms to describe the electoral outcomes such as 'political earthquake', "Tsunami Rakyat", 'regime change' and so on (Hazis, 2018; Hutchinson & Aun, 2020; Loh, 2018). The surge of change that occurred nationwide demonstrated the disenchantment of the people towards BN and their expectation that PH would reform the nation. PH promised to promote good governance and policies based on political needs beyond ethnicity and patronage under the "new Malaysia " and "new politics" slogans. Unfortunately, after less than two years in power, the PH-led government collapsed on 24 February 2020. The collapse of PH led to power struggles among the political elites and resulted in the formation of a political coalition – Perikatan Nasional (PN) – led by Muhyiddin Yassin. Nonetheless, the PN-led government too fell from power on 16 August 2021 after a series of defections involving several UMNO Members of Parliament (MP).

Despite a smooth transition of power at the federal level after GE14, it was a different scenario in Sabah as BN and the Warisan-PH alliance were tied at 29 seats each, causing a stalemate in the 60-seat State Legislative Assembly (SLA). STAR (Homeland Solidarity Party) that won 2 seats emerged as a kingmaker. The contest to form the new state government reached its peak on the afternoon of 10 May 2018, when Musa Aman, the incumbent chief minister, claimed that BN secured a simple majority after