



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"¹ 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"², 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
