



# Sabah State Election: Contextualising Regionalism in the Rise and Decline of UMNO

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## **Sabah State Election: Contextualising Regionalism in the Rise and Decline of UMNO**

*By Wong Chin Huat*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The Sabah State Election has, for now, resulted in a two-party competition between GRS-PGRS and Warisan, the local multi-ethnic heirs of Sabah UMNO. The defeat of Sabah UMNO itself at the hands of its two local splinters may be better explained by government incumbency and alliances of local personalities than regionalism.*

### **COMMENTARY**

After the recently concluded State Election, Sabah, for now, appears to have returned to the two-party system that existed before 1994, jointly dominated by the two splinter parties of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in Sabah.

UMNO is the prototypical “national/Malayan party” that many Christian and Chinese Sabahans resent for ousting the regionalist Christian-led Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) government in 1994.

In the recent election, Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS), a Muslim-dominated coalition, somewhat resembling the old UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (BN), was returned to power with 29 of 73 seats. Its anchor party, Parti Gagasan Rakyat Sabah (PGRS), won 23 seats, while PBS, as its sole junior partner, contributed six.

The opposition, Warisan, is a Muslim-led multi-ethnic party with a strong base in the East Coast, centred on Semporna. It won 25 seats, a marginal improvement of two from 23 in 2020. After this election, Warisan has 40 per cent of its state lawmakers representing metropolitan voters, with 32 per cent being ethnic Chinese – a profile resembling that of the national party, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), led by Prime

Minister Anwar Ibrahim. PKR is itself an earlier Muslim-led multi-ethnic splinter of UMNO.

### **History of UMNO and Its Splinters**

The growth of Warisan and PGRS is the flip side of UMNO's decline. The two parties have their roots in the Grand Old Party's local factionalism marked by personalities (current Governor Musa Aman v Warisan President Shafie Apdal, both previously Sabah UMNO heavyweights) and ethnicity (Bajau Sama in West Coast v Badjau Semporna in East Coast).

When the 1MDB scandal caused a schism within the national UMNO, it also gave birth to the two splinters, producing a superficial "national-local" differentiation among the three parties: Sabah UMNO, Warisan, and PGRS. In 2016, Shafie Apdal opted to form the regionalist splinter, Warisan, instead of leading the Sabah chapter of another splinter, the Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu). Months after UMNO lost federal power in May 2018, a second group of Sabah UMNO leaders moved to form Sabah Bersatu, which later morphed into PGRS in December 2022, just weeks after the national Bersatu lost the 2022 federal election. This left the rump Sabah UMNO standing as the vilified "national party".

Naturally, Warisan, PGRS, and Sabah UMNO are similar to each other. They are electoral machines, each an alliance of local notables representing clans and ethnic groups. Often, the candidates are more representatives of their clan or ethnic group within a party than representatives of their party before the voters. At the same time, many clans and ethnic groups diversify their support across multiple parties. This is most pronounced for the trio but is generally true of Sabah parties.

Unlike UMNO and Bersatu in the Peninsula, the trio are not hardwired by the ideology of Malay nationalism or Islamism, which enabled their expansion and co-optation of non-Muslim politicians. This had been the case for the first champion of Muslim interests, the United Sabah National Organisation (USNO), which UMNO replaced in 1994.

### **Sabah Political Culture**

The transactional nature of Sabah politics is why independent candidates – five this round – can emerge victorious in multi-cornered contests, defeating unpopular candidates picked by major parties. It also explains why 65 per cent of state lawmakers who left their parties between 2018 and 2020 and then sought re-election in the same constituencies in the 2020 election could win.

In underdeveloped areas, lawmakers' first and foremost function is to bring funding and development to their constituencies, much like ATMs in human form. Voters do not mind candidates changing party labels, as long as they can deliver more goodies.

Take, for example, the new state minister for education, James Ratib, who won for PGRS the inland seat of Sugut, a six-hour drive from the State Legislature building. Ratib won the seat for UMNO in 2018, then jumped to the Warisan-led state government before returning to UMNO to defend the seat in 2020. He then joined PGRS in 2023. In each election, he was representing the ruling party – federal, state or sometimes both.

Did Sugut voters choose Ratib over his strongest opponent, who was from Bersatu, because PGRS is a local party? No, more likely, they voted for him and the patronage he could bring home as a state minister.

The decline of Sabah UMNO should therefore be seen in the context of the success of its two local splinters and can only be fully understood by revisiting its rise since 1994. UMNO had dominated Sabah in four state elections since 1999, holding 50 to 53 per cent of seats. In the same period, Sabah BN's seat share rose from 65 per cent (1999) to an absolute control of 98 per cent (2004 and 2008) before receding to 80 per cent (2013).

In the 2018 state election, Sabah UMNO won only 17 seats while Warisan won 21. Warisan then came to power when UMNO's BN ally, the United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation (UPKO), switched to join Warisan, bringing six seats with it. In the 2020 state election, Warisan won 23 seats against Sabah UMNO's 14 and Sabah Bersatu's 11 despite an electoral pact between UMNO and Bersatu.

Today, GRS (29 seats) and Warisan (25) together control 74 per cent of seats, exceeding BN's share in 1999. Warisan and PGRS together now control 66 per cent of seats, a share 13 to 16 percentage points higher than UMNO's at its peak. Counting in UMNO's current five seats, the pan-UMNO trio controls 70 per cent of state seats.

The earlier expansion of Sabah UMNO, first, and now inherited by the trio, is fuelled by three factors: the expansion of the Muslim electorate through the enfranchisement of Filipino and Indonesian Muslims and religious conversion, partisan redelineation of electoral constituencies and the political fragmentation of the Christian natives after 1994

### **Regionalism as Slogan vs Reality**

The growing salience of regionalism – symbolised by slogans like “Save Sabah” (Warisan), GRS’ “*Rumah kita, kita jaga* (Our home, we take care) and “Sabah First” (UPKO) – especially amongst the youth and urban electorate is unmistakable. So is the 90 per cent seat share and 78 per cent vote share of the local parties.

Nevertheless, the actual impact of regionalism may be limited to the urban, predominantly Christian Kadazan-Dusun-Murut-Rungus (KDMR) areas. Regionalism had clearly helped Warisan find a common appeal – connecting Shafie Apdal's largely east-coast Muslim bumiputera base to the urban Chinese and KDMR voters – enabling Warisan's sweeping victory in eight urban seats, which the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) and PKR had won in 2020. It

also allowed UPKO to increase its seats from one to three after it walked out of Anwar Ibrahim's national coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH). However, another PBS splinter, Parti Solidariti Tanah Airku (STAR), shrank from six seats to two after walking out of GRS over its pact with PH.

Regionalism, however, cannot explain why Warisan underperformed GRS in both the Muslim and Christian areas despite the former's older and stronger credentials in Sabah regionalism. GRS wrested eight Muslim seats from UMNO and three native seats from Warisan.

In fact, while GRS had run as a local coalition, it is widely seen as close to, or even beholden to, Anwar Ibrahim, and thus controlled by him. GRS leaders have allegedly been involved in a corruption scandal since 2024, yet most have not been charged by the federal authorities. Four days before polling, a bribe-giver-turned-whistleblower, Albert Tei, claimed he had been instructed by the Prime Minister to [secretly film GRS leaders admitting to corruption](#).

Perhaps, a more accurate reading of this election is the attraction and power of government incumbency and alliances of heavyweight politicians engulfed in the chorus of regionalism. Quietly, a two-party system is emerging, each with its respective political solar system that includes KDMR and Chinese politicians in orbit.

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