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Title	The Political Change And Socio-Economic Development Of The Kadazandusuns (KD) In Sabah, East Malaysia: A Reflection On Mahathir's Policies And Their Consequences To The KD Community
Source	http://phuakl.tripod.com/pssm/conference/day132.doc
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Publication/Conference	4th International Malaysian Studies Conference; 3-5 August 2004, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi
Edition	NA
Document Type	Article
CPI Primary Subject	East Malaysia
CPI Secondary Subject	Sabah; ; ;
Geographic Terms	Sabah;
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**THE POLITICAL CHANGE AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE
KADAZANDUSUNS (KD) IN SABAH, EAST MALAYSIA: A REFLECTION ON
MAHATHIR'S POLICIES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES TO THE KD
COMMUNITY ¹**

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Abstract

There are two main themes explored in this paper. The first theme analyses the political change of the KD from 1981 to 2003. An analysis of elections results both at the state and parliamentary levels will be adopted to examine the extent to which the KD's voting behaviour to a particular party or individual has changed and subsequently influenced their political alignment. The second theme focuses on the course and consequences of socio-economic development during the same period. Both themes are examined against the backdrop of the Mahathir era. This is important as the KD have experienced a "sudden" change in their political and socio-economic development when Dr. Mahathir was in power. Moreover, it was Dr. Mahathir, through UMNO's hegemony in Sabah, that caused the political representation of the KD to wither, and to a certain extent, marginalised in the Malaysian political context. This paper argues that some of the policies brought about by Dr. Mahathir on Sabah have significant repercussions on the KD community. This was reflected when Dr. Mahathir introduced the rotation system of the chief ministership post and his "economic sanction" on the then opposition-led Sabah which was under the leadership of Joseph Pairin Kitingan the president of PBS (*Parti Bersatu Sabah*/Sabah United Party). In the later discussion, this paper also argues that while Dr. Mahathir's policies on Sabah have contributed significantly to the socio-economic marginalisation and political under-representation of the KD community, it is also important to note that the KD leaders themselves have failed to identify and set priorities for their community's political and socio-economic development. In Malaysia's plural society, it is important that each ethnic community is given equal opportunity to represent itself socio-economically and politically be it at the state or federal level. In the meantime, it is also important for all leaders from the diverse Malaysian society to concentrate on their communities' real needs and try to avoid immature and futile politicking that is not beneficial to both the country and the people.

Keywords: Political change, socio-economic development, Kadazandusun

¹ This paper will be presented at the Fourth Malaysian Studies International Conference, 3-5 August, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Bangi, Selangor.

INTRODUCTION

The KD² constitute about 18.5 per cent of Sabah's total population (Malaysia 2001b), making it the fifth largest ethnic community in Malaysia after the Malay, Chinese, Indian and Ibans (<http://www.statistics.gov.my/english/pressdemo.htm>). The KD have experienced tremendous changes in their political and socio-economic development in the past years under the auspices of different ruling political parties and ever changing leadership. Looking at other ethnic communities across Malaysia, one would have the tendency to ask whether the KD have fared relatively well—particularly in the political and socio-economic aspects—as compared to other ethnic communities. Even if socio-economic indicators fail to acknowledge this argument, then just look around and start counting how many KD have managed to become professionals—doctors, professors, lawyers, etc. Then, compare the number of KD professionals with those in the rural areas who have been living under poverty for a consistent four decades since the inauguration of Sabah's inclusion into Malaysia in 1963 (Jomo & Wee, 2002; Wee, 1995; Kitingan and Ongkili, 1989; Mohd. Aslam and Asan Ali Golam Hassan, 2003; and Pang Teck Wai, 1992) (See also Appendix). One can see there is a huge gap between well-off and educated KD with KD in the rural areas.

The unstable state of KD politics and distorted socio-economic development have begun to take their course in the early 1980s. In the early 1980s, Sabah politics had changed its course from state politics to ethnic politics which saw Pairin and PBS emerged to counter Harris's BERJAYA. This early period of 1980s has been argued by scholars as the raise of KD cultural revival (Loh, 1992). From the mid 1980s onwards, Sabah was then ruled by the PBS

² The KDCA (Kadazandusun Cultural Association) constitution, Article 6 (1) defines the KD "as the definitive indigenous people of Sabah comprising the following dialectical ethnic groups: *Bonggi, Bundu, Dumpas, Gana, Garo, Ida'an, Kadayan, Kimaragang, Kolobuan, Kuijau, Lingkabau, Liwan, Lobu, Sonsogon, Lundayo (Lundayeh), Makiang, Malapi, Mangkaak, Minokok, Murut, Nabai, Pingas, Paitan, Rumanau, Rungus, Sinobu, Sinorupu, Sukang, Sungei, Tatana, Tangara, Tidong, Tindal, Tolinting, Tobilung, Tombonuo, Tuhawon, Tutung, Bisaya, Lotud.*

government. It was also within this period that Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, Malaysia's fourth prime minister, emerged and articulated his dominance in Malaysian politics (Hwong, 2003). This paper argues that under Dr. Mahathir's tenure, the KD have been sidelined further from the mainstream Malaysian politics. And this has become evident when PBS, renounced from the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) to become the sole opposition party in Sabah in the mid 1990s. While this paper argues that Dr. Mahathir as among the political leaders who have failed to uplift the KD socio-economic development, it also suggests that the KD political leaders themselves have contributed to their community's further backwardness. This paper will attempt to put forward its argument to indicate that Dr. Mahathir, through his obvious dominance in Malaysian politics, had been responsible in attempting to reduce the KD community's presence in the national political mainstream by paving the way for UMNO (United Malay National Organisation) to spread its geopolitical reach in Sabah.

This paper also looks into various issues that happened in Sabah in the early 2000s particularly after the completion of the 2004 general elections. One of the most important but often neglected issues that has been plaguing the KD is the "KD unity" issue. This paper argues that this unity issue has only emerged after the three KD leaders namely Pairin, Bernard Dompok, and Joseph Kurup had realised that their position had been threatened with regard to power sharing in Sabah. This was evident after the introduction of the rotation system of the chief minister post. Under the so-called unique power sharing formula suggested by Dr. Mahathir, only Dompok managed to hold the post. Pairin, considering the fact that he was with the opposition when the formula was formed had to forget his intention to become the chief minister. While Kurup had no chance at all to fill the post as it was announced later by Dr. Mahathir that an UMNO representative would have the "privilege" to hold the chief minister post for two term based on the fact that it controlled a majority of seats at the State Legislative Assembly. When the formula was scrapped later by Abdullah Badawi, then these KD leaders realised that it was not only their position in Sabah politics that needed to

be re-examined but most importantly, the KD's position in Malaysia's multiethnic society. The KD leaders in particular needed to ask themselves these questions:

- 1) Have we fought a "good fight" and done enough to uplift our community's socio-economic development?
- 2) Have we reflected on ourselves the past incidences, predicaments and learnt some lessons from them?
- 3) Who are we in Malaysia and what we should do from now on?
- 4) What new strategies we should think of in order to play more meaningful role in Malaysia?
- 5) We often talk about KD nationalism, but why haven't we talked about Malaysian nationalism? Isn't Malaysia our country?

Finally, this paper provides some of the ways on how the KD community could progress further—politically and socio-economically, together with other ethnic communities across Malaysia. It is our hope that this paper will be able to generate further discussion and reflection on the KD political change and socio-economic development not just strictly within the Mahathir era but during the British rule and subsequently after Sabah's inclusion into Malaysia in 1963. It is also our hope that with this little contribution, we will all work hard to achieve the notion of Malaysian Nation/*Bangsa Malaysia*, and start to realise that living in Malaysia, we cannot afford to ignore other ethnic communities that make what Malaysia is today.

KD POLITICS IN 1980s

The making of Joseph Pairin and PBS dominance in Sabah politics

In the early 1980s period, the KD were largely represented by the BERJAYA led by Harris Salleh. Though BERJAYA (*Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah*) was established on the multiethnic platform, there were several KD leaders in BERJAYA who received considerable support from the KD. During his second term of power, Salleh was, in many occasions, challenged by the much younger

Pairin mostly over the issues of illegal immigrants and the transfer of Labuan to the Federal Government. When Pairin could not tolerate anymore with Salleh's leadership, he resigned from BERJAYA and formed PBS in March 1985. PBS' meteoric rise in Sabah politics proved to be detrimental to BERJAYA. In the April 1985 state elections, PBS won 25 seats, USNO (United Sabah National Organisation) 16, BERJAYA 6, and PASOK 1 (Ongkili, 1989: pp. 75). With this, BERJAYA's rule in Sabah ended abruptly. The PBS took the helm from BERJAYA and once again, Sabah was in a political limelight when the much younger and aggressive leader, Pairin, joined the foray of political uncertainties in Malaysia under the premiership of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad.

Strained federal-state relations": PBS vs Kuala Lumpur

After Dr. Mahathir took the prime ministership from the then third Prime Minister of Malaysia, Hussien Onn, policies concerning federal and state relations notably on Sabah had abruptly changed. Dr. Mahathir's dynamic leadership at the federal and international levels was apparently lacking at the state level. The tough medical-doctor-turned-politician had, in many occasions, taken Sabah politicians to their tasks by pressing them to accept his policies which had been regarded as federal-centred and autocratic in nature. Initially, the relationship between Dr. Mahathir and Pairin was overwhelmingly good. Dr. Mahathir saw the opportunity to establish closer ties and cooperation with Pairin and PBS Government after the latter was given a huge mandate in the 1986 state elections. Nevertheless, the post-1986 Sabah politics showed numerous standoffs between Dr. Mahathir and Pairin that to a certain extent strained their relationship. Anti-federal sentiments, for example, remained obvious in Sabah with leaders from federal and state levels blaming one another over issues concerning the exclusive rights of Sabahans in particular the "20 points" matter. Further, the geographical distance between the Federal and Sabah Governments had also contributed to the desire of the state to gain greater regional autonomy. The tense relationship between Dr. Mahathir and Pairin became obvious when PBS Government decided to amend Article 18 (2) (d) of the state constitution without the

knowledge of Federal Government. The amendment, PBS leaders argued, was necessary to prevent politicians from switching parties. The PBS leaders hoped that with the amendment, elected and nominated assemblymen would vacate their seats in the assembly if they are expelled or resigned from the party. The Federal leadership saw this move as undemocratic and impractical.

Another issue that concerned PBS leaders was the problems posed by illegal immigrants. The PBS government stressed that the influx of illegal immigrants had to be controlled and they must be sent back to their respective countries. The PBS leaders claimed that these illegal immigrants had deprived Sabahans of their jobs and rights. In 1988, PBS Government implemented a new immigration policy that sought swift deportation of illegal immigrants who had entered Sabah without legal and proper documentation. While the illegal immigrants issue had not yet been mutually and appropriately solved, yet another issue ensued. The PBS leaders were also concerned about the financial distribution and allocation given by the Federal Government which they claimed insufficient to develop Sabah's economy. The PBS leaders were also dissatisfied by the large number of Peninsula-born staffs in the upper level of Sabah administrative hierarchy. This, according to PBS leaders, had denied Sabahans of their rights to hold important positions in the state government. The PBS Government also wanted the share of oil revenue allocated to Sabah to be increased from 5 percent to 50 percent. Dr. Mahathir regarded these demands as too state-centric and could be detrimental to national unity. Most of PBS leaders were then regarded as secessionists that had instilled anti-federal sentiments among Sabahans. While the strained relationship between Dr. Mahathir and Pairin became almost intolerable, the KD, whom Pairin had enjoyed the most support from, seemed to give their full support to Pairin.

KD POLITICS IN 1990s

Wither KD politics?

The political development in 1990s recorded four elections in Sabah: state and parliamentary elections that were held in 1990, the 1994 state elections, and the 1995 general elections. In the 1990 state elections, PBS Government had toughened its stance on what it believed to be the exclusive rights of the Sabahans; this included the “20 points” matter. In fact, PBS leaders had included this issue as one of their political pledges. The 1990 state elections was viewed by many observers as a battle between PBS and USNO. As expected, PBS won the state elections with a two-third majority. Of the 48 state assembly seats contested, PBS won 36 seats while USNO 12 (<http://www.spr.gov.my/laporan/1990/bm.html>). In terms of popular votes, PBS managed to obtain 53.9 percent, followed by USNO 26.1 percent, BERJAYA 7 percent, PRS (*Parti Rakyat Sabah* Sabah/People’s Party/ 3.3 per cent, AKAR (*Angkatan Keadilan Rakyat*/People’s Justice League) 2.9 per cent, DAP (Democratic Action Party) 1.6 percent, and Independent 1.1 per cent (*Ibid*). The election results showed that PBS’ presence in Sabah politics was still strong. Amid the political frictions between the Federal and PBS Governments, and barely after the completion of the 1990 state elections, Dr. Mahathir dissolved the parliament and general elections began. The PBS government was allocated 14 out of 20 parliamentary seats. As it was expected, BN won the general elections and returned to power by winning all 127 out of 180 seats (Mohd. Agus, 2000: pp. 513-546). Trailing behind was *Gagasan Rakyat* with 45 seats, PBS 14 and Independent 1 (*Ibid*). The PBS leaders’ dissention to the Federal Government intensified when Pairin and his henchmen decided to renounce BN and aligned with *Gagasan Rakyat* which was led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. Pairin’s political manoeuvre had angered Dr. Mahathir which he called “a stab in the back”. Pairin, on the other hand, had chosen not to align with the Federal Government, at the expense of the KD community, because he thought that PBS’ struggle could no longer be achieved if the Federal Government kept on ignoring

its demands. Pairin, however, had miscalculated Dr. Mahathir and UMNO's strengths.

Protégé turned nemesis: the battle between Pairin and Mahathir

Pairin was then viewed by federal leaders as their new political nemesis in Sabah. Dr. Mahathir, who was still in disbelief over Pairin's sudden pull-out from BN, had vowed not to accept Pairin back into BN fold. Dr. Mahathir's personal vendetta on Pairin seemed to be extended to the KD whom Dr. Mahathir regarded as Pairin's all-time loyal supporters. Sabah politics after PBS' sudden pullout from BN had changed ever since. The PBS, though enjoyed considerable support from most Sabahans and in particular the KD community, seemed to be incapable of developing Sabah. Financial allocation from the Federal Government was cut off while logging exports were also banned, depriving PBS Government of "principle internal source of revenue" (Brown, 2004: pp. 232-239). Dr. Mahathir did not stop imposing his unprecedented and draconian policies on PBS Government. In 1991, Dr. Mahathir used UMNO to spread his geopolitical reach in Sabah. The PBS Government observed the coming of UMNO as the Federal Government's attempt to intervene in Sabah politics. The 1994 state elections saw the support given to PBS dwindling. Though it won the elections, the number of seats it managed to retain had decreased. The PBS Government came back to power with 25 seats while the remaining 23 seats went to BN which comprised of UMNO with 18 seats, SAPP (Sabah People's Progressive Party) 3, LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) 1, and AKAR 1 respectively (Mohd. Agus, 2000: pp. 535). With only 2 seats short, BN managed to deny PBS of two-third majority. The PBS had suffered another major blow when there was a significant drop in the popular votes it gained. As compared to the 1990 state elections, PBS had gained 53.9 percent of the popular votes but in the 1994 state elections, it was reduced to 49.9 percent (<http://www.spr.gov.my/laporan/1990/bm.html>).

The 1994 mass defection and the beginning of UMNO's hegemony

The events that followed after 1994 state elections shocked Pairin and his party stalwarts. The PBS' desire to form a government for the second term was dashed when three of its assemblymen announced their defection to BN. Jeffrey Kitingan, Pairin's younger brother, chose UMNO as his new political base while Kurup and Dompok—regarded as PBS strongmen—formed their own parties—PBRs (*Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah* Sabah/United People's Party) and PDS (*Parti Demokratik Sabah*/Sabah Democratic Party) respectively. Other PBS assemblymen took the same political manoeuvre by joining either UMNO or the new parties formed by Kurup and Dompok. With only 5 state assemblymen and 5 member of parliaments in its hold, PBS era in Sabah almost came to an end, and Pairin had to resign from his post after almost a decade's in power (Mohd. Agus, 2000: pp. 513-546). The UMNO had suddenly become the largest party in Sabah and in the state legislative assembly. Currently, UMNO has about 418, 679 members and 5, 313 branches in Sabah, making it the second largest number of UMNO members after Johor. (*New Straits Times*, June 12, 2003).

The 1999 state and general elections and their significance

The political development in the 1990s also recorded another important state and general elections in Sabah: the 1999 state and general elections. These two elections were important to Dr. Mahathir for two reasons: One, he wanted to see whether Pairin and PBS still had the support and capability of mirroring UMNO's hegemony in Sabah; second, the two elections would be a crucial point to Dr. Mahathir's political career after his sacking of Anwar Ibrahim, his former deputy. The March 1999 state elections saw BN won 31 out of the 48 seats (Loh, 2003: pp. 230). Of the 31 seats allocated to BN, UMNO managed to win all of the 24 seats it contested while PBS 17, SAPP 5, PDS 2, and LDP 1 (*Ibid*, 2003: pp. 230; Mohd. Noor. Yazid, 2000: pp. 434). Other BN parties such as PBRs, AKAR, and MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) failed to win any seats allocated to them.

In terms of popular votes, BN managed to obtain 46.4 percent, PBS 41.3 percent, BERSEKUTU 10.5 percent and others 1.8 percent (Loh, 2003: pp. 231). The election results clearly indicated that *non-Muslim Bumiputera* especially the KD still rendered their electoral support to PBS. Out of the 12 predominantly KD seats, PBS managed to win 11 seats while BN won only one 1 (*Ibid*, 2003: pp. 231). In terms of popular votes derived from the predominantly KD areas, 58.8 percent went to PBS while BN obtained 36.6 percent (*Ibid*, 2003: pp. 231).

Several KD and former PBS leaders aligned to BN lost in the elections. Dompok, the PDS president, lost his seat to PBS candidate, Clarence Bongkos, by a majority of 4,388 votes while Kurup was defeated by Jeffry Kitingan in the Bingkor seat (Mohd. Noor. Yazid, 2000: pp. 436-439). It was argued that Dompok and Kurup's losses in their respective constituencies were as a result of the KD "wrath" over the 1994 incidence which showed that these former PBS leaders defected from PBS to form their own parties (*Ibid*, 2000: pp. 432-445; Mohd. Agus, 2000: pp. 513-546). Had it not been for this mass defection, PBS would have been able to form a government for the second term in Sabah. The KD voters, it was suggested, regarded that these leaders had undermined the true struggle of the KD. The formation of PDS by Dompok, for example, was not welcomed well by most of the KD. Dompok's move was then blamed for the further split of the KD which after the 1994 state elections, were divided into three rival camps: Pairin's PBS, Dompok's PDS, and Kurup's PBRs. The 1999 state elections results had, to a certain extent, attested to the KD support of PBS.

Barely nine months after the 1999 state elections, Sabah was once again involved in another crucial elections: the 1999 general elections. Sabah was allocated with 20 parliamentary seats. Of the 20 parliamentary seats, BN won 17 and PBS 3. Of the 17 seats won by BN, UMNO won 11, UPKO (formerly known as PDS) won 3, SAPP 2, and LDP 1. The 1999 general elections results showed the support given to PBS by the KD voters had dwindled. Interestingly, the support given to other KD-based parties that aligned to BN such as UPKO had increased. This was evident in the Kinabalu, Tuaran, and Penampang

parliamentary seats. In the Kinabalu parliamentary seat, Dompok of UPKO managed to obtained 11,723 votes with a majority of 5,423 votes as opposed to PBS' candidate, Janimin Saliun, who obtained 6,300 votes (Mohd. Noor. Yazid, 2000: pp. 436-439). Pairin himself had suffered a major blow when his majority nosedived to a mere 250 votes. Though some scholars viewed BN's win in the 1999 general elections as an endorsement to UMNO's presence and Dr. Mahathir's leadership in Sabah, other political observers, on the other hand, blamed Dr. Mahathir's "dirty" political strategies as the contributing factor to PBS' sudden downfall.

For instance, according to Loh (2003: pp. 229-252), there were several factors that had contributed to BN's win in the elections. The first one being BN's massive "political stability and development" campaign. In its campaigns, BN had attempted to prove the people that it had contributed a lot towards Sabah's political stability and economic development. It claimed that the RM1.2 billion allocation to build UMS (University Malaysia Sabah) and several schools and polytechnics, and the RM18 million Likas mosque as among its economic achievements since installed in power. The PBS, on the other hand, tried to counter-argue BN's rhetoric by arguing that the KKIP (Kota Kinabalu Industrial Park) was implemented without proper planning, implementation and monitoring. The PBS also claimed that while investors are keen on investing in the 610-hectare industrial park, lack of infrastructure had caused them to complain (*Ibid*: pp. 229-252). The PBS also claimed that Dr. Mahathir's idea of rotating the chief minister post of Sabah for every two years had also caused a number of policies with regard to the KKIP could not be implemented properly because of different policies introduced by the concerned chief minister (*Ibid*: pp. 229-252). Another factor that contributed to BN's massive win, according to Loh, was money politics through the use of public funds. Electoral workers who worked on behalf of BN were given sufficient money to establish a strong electoral machinery. Money was also used to print pamphlets or erect billboards. The BN's electoral workers were also given financial assistances to boost their morale to work for BN (*Ibid*:

pp. 229-252). Since PBS was no longer in power, it had difficulty to access to public funds to generate its campaign's movement. The BN also used mass media extensively to spread its election manifestos while PBS was only given very little media coverage. Another issue that was said to contribute to PBS' downfall is the phantom voters issue. The PBS had reminded the Election Commission (EC) that phantom voters existed in the electoral rolls. The sudden increase of voters, PBS claimed, was possibly caused by illegal immigrants being registered as Malaysian citizen and subsequently given "registered voters" status (*Ibid*, 2000: pp. 229-252).

No matter how persistent PBS was in trying to deny BN's win in the elections, it seemed to be helpless and could not do anything to either challenge BN's electoral victory or influence voters not to vote BN. The PBS had become powerless after the elections. At any rate, Pairin had miscalculated Dr. Mahathir's "shrewd" political manoeuvre and had to accept the fact that PBS' presence in Sabah politics had to be "deactivated" for a while. Dr. Mahathir, on the other hand, had tried very hard, through whatever means, to "wipe out" Pairin from Sabah and Malaysian politics as a whole. However, Dr. Mahathir had also miscalculated Pairin's hidden strength which was the unwavering support he acquired from the KD. It seemed that the KD did not want to lose Pairin nor did they want PBS to disappear from Sabah politics. At this critical juncture, PBS had to accept the fact that it had to pursue its struggle alone as the sole opposition party in Sabah.

KD POLITICS IN THE 2000s

PBS dramatic return and the question of better political representation

After almost nine years in the opposition fold, PBS had finally rejoined BN. The surprise move by Pairin was viewed by many observers as inevitable and necessary for the KD socio-economic development. Pairin had himself admitted that it was time for him to reconcile with Dr. Mahathir and the Federal Government for the good of the KD and Sabahans in general. Responding to his

decision to bring PBS back into the BN fold, Pairin said, “We want to start afresh. I regretted what took place in 1990” (<http://www.pbs-sabah.org/pbs3/html/events>). Dr. Mahathir, in responding to his decision to accept PBS back into BN said he was a very forgiving person and willing to work with Pairin for the betterment of Sabahan people. Two years after PBS’ return to BN, Malaysia was set to experience another crucial general elections in 2004. In the 2004 general elections, all eyes were focused on the Malay heartland states such as Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu where PAS (*Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*/Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party) was expected to give a tough fight to UMNO. The scenario was entirely different in Sabah. The mass media in particular did very little to highlight the elections scenario in Sabah. This might be due to the fact that there were no strong opposition parties in Sabah. The general elections results showed that BN managed to secure 59 state seats out of the 60 state seats contested (*The Star*, March 23, 2004). One seat went to an Independent candidate, John Ghani, the former UMNO information chief who defeated the incumbent, Wences Angang, the UPKO’s vice president. In another way, the outcomes of the general elections had strengthened UMNO’s position in Sabah.

After the general elections was over, the rewards went to UMNO. In the state cabinet line-up announced later by Sabah Chief Minister, Musa Aman, 10 of the newly appointed cabinet ministers were from UMNO, only 2 from PBS and 1 each from UPKO, SAPP and LDP (*New Straits Times*, March 28, 2004). In the assistant minister line-up, UMNO was given 7 portfolios, PBS 4 and 1 each for UPKO and SAPP (*Ibid*, March 28, 2004). Surprisingly, there was no allocation given to PBRs. But the question is, will the KD community be better represented in the cabinet with the allocations given to them? At the federal level, only two leaders from the KD community were appointed as full ministers but with “lesser-known” portfolios such as Dompok and Dr. Maximus Ongkili who were made ministers in the Prime Minister’s Department. Even with the absence of opposition parties in Sabah, there must still be a check and balance of power in

the state legislative assembly. The UMNO, being the largest party to date must prove that its political struggle are not only for the Malays in the Peninsula but for all Sabahans notwithstanding their cultural and religious differences. But the fact that there are no “real Malays” in Sabah will not only question the sincerity of the “UMNO-nised” KD leaders of their real struggle but also their rationale in joining a Peninsula-based party which is, politically and culturally speaking, not related to them at all.

Rotation system of Sabah chief minister: why is there no consensus among the KD leaders?

Interestingly, barely days after the 2004 general election results were released, Abdullah announced that the rotation system for the chief minister post to be scrapped. Pairin, the PBS stalwart and *Huguan Siou* (paramount leader) of the KD, in echoing for the abolishment of the system quipped, “We are happy that it has been scrapped as we can now concentrate on our jobs without having to debate anymore about rotation” (*New Sunday Times*, March 28, 2004). The other KD leaders, however, were not really happy with the decision. Dompok, the president of UPKO, responded to the decision by saying, “My party cannot insist on the rotation as we only had six seats. But then again I think there should be some power sharing arrangement” (*Daily Express*, March 29, 2004). Dompok proposed that as an alternative for the rotation system, a power sharing based on the 4:4:2 ratio among the *Muslim Bumiputera*, KD, and Chinese be implemented. Another KD leader such as Kurup, who led PBRS was in a mum over the issue. The discontentment among the KD leaders in relation to power sharing has always been the central issue in Sabah politics. However, as it is observed, the series of in-fighting within party level, i.e., the Jeffrey Kitingan-Joseph Kurup saga and the party-hopping practices, have hampered the socio-economic-political development of the KD. Due to this perennial problem faced the KD leaders, there have been calls from numerous parties for the KD leaders to set aside their differences and work hard to unite the KD under one political platform. However, these calls have not been accepted well by some quarters that claim

that the unity issue has never been a problem in a first place. Our next discussion will touch on the unity issue briefly before making a conclusion as to what extent this issue has hampered the KD community from progressing further.

The KD unity: real or imagined?

This is something that has been plaguing the KD leaders for all this while. The growing rhetorical consensus to unite the KD community has failed to materialise or even seen as making any sound progress. If anything, the only platform for the so-called KD unity is through cultural celebration such as the *Pesta Kaamatan*. However, this sort of platform to achieve unity among the KD leaders is quite temporal in nature. The basis for unity seems to be cultural rather than political. KD leaders from PBS, UPKO, and PBRS seem to be disinterested to discuss intellectually about KD unity because of their political differences. While the current platform for unity among the KD leaders seem to stem from cultural celebration, the KD unity that is derived from political platform, for the time being, seems to be difficult to be achieved. The PBS blamed PDS, a splinter party of PBS which was later renamed UPKO, as among the causes for KD disunity (*Daily Express*, May 26, 2004). The PBS deputy president, Maximus Ongkili, in calling for a greater cooperation among the KD leaders, had urged Dompok “to walk hand in hand with PBS president Joseph Kitingan for the betterment of the Kadazandusun-Murut community” (*Daily Express*, May 25, 2004). Dompok, however, said that PBS should not blame his decision to form UPKO because “the action (of forming UPKO) was based on a consensus by PBS leaders at that time (when Dompok left PBS in 1994)”. The pointing fingers among the KD leaders seem to be the situation of the day. Neither Pairin, Dompok, nor Kurup has the tenacity to materialise the so-called KD unity. Perhaps, this myth of KD unity has been created by the KD political leaders themselves to pursue their own political agenda. At the grassroots level, the KD community seems to be enjoying their lives living together with other communities without any feeling of animosity among them. When asked if indeed the KD unity is real or imagined, a professional KD, Ms. Mary (not a real name), quipped,

*"Unity in the Kadazadusun community is still strong but it is undeniable that it is not as strong as before. We can see it (unity) when it comes to community service. Last time in a village if there is any family organising a function such as wedding, the whole people in the village will come and help for the preparation and there we can see how good the bond among the Kadazadusuns. This is hardly seen nowadays. We can still see but it is not as often as before. I strongly believe that the Kadazandusun has not disunited but I cannot deny that it (unity) has loosened up"*³

Another KD professional, Mr. Joseph (not a real name), however, is quite critical on the KD unity issue. For him, the root cause of the problem is created by the KD political leaders whom he thought of not wanting to reconcile because of their political differences. He argued that,

*"When it comes to the KD issue, these three parties (PBS, UPKO, PBRs) have always clashed to each other. No unity at all. The spirit of mitatabang (gotong-roiyong) should be preserved in tandem with the effort of the KD community to develop themselves"*⁴

In echoing Joseph's contention that the KD disunity is primarily caused by the political leaders' stubbornness to set aside their political differences, Mary said,

"Yes, it (disunity among political leaders) is obvious....when the elections time come, you can see people take advantage to separate the community and this affects some groups of people"

It is somehow obvious that the KD unity still exists among the ordinary KD especially in rural areas. But at the top level, there is a huge division among the three political parties. The KD have long been united ever since Sabah was incorporated into Malaysia. This was evident when there were no communal clashes whatsoever among the KD within the period. What is obvious is that the KD unity issue has been politicised and unnecessarily manipulated by some unscrupulous KD leaders to fulfil their political agenda. Nonetheless, if the KD political leaders keep on sensationalising the issue and make no attempt to explain what the KD unity is all about (whether it really happens and needs to be addressed or vice versa), it is feared that there might be dissension among some factions of the KD both at the party and grassroots levels.

³ Interview with Ms. Mary (not a real name), Miri, Sarawak, July 14, 2004.

⁴ Interview with Mr. Joseph (not a real name), via telephone conversation, July 5, 2004.

CONSEQUENCES OF MAHATHIR'S POLICIES TO THE KD POLITICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, 1981-2003

After an array of tumultuous years surrounding Sabah politics, the KD have been further sidelined from the Malaysian political mainstream. If anything, the socio-economic development of the KD have been one that they cannot be proud of. While other ethnic communities across Malaysia have enjoyed Malaysia's rapid socio-economic and technological progress, the KD are still struggling to grapple with the socio-economic pie that they could have benefited through Sabah's incorporation into Malaysia in 1963. In the early 1960s, the KD had evolved politically to uphold Sabah sovereignty from foreign powers. Then, in the 1970s onwards, the course and direction of the KD political struggle had abruptly changed to one that was focused on ethnic struggle. This was exacerbated by Pairin through his political vehicle PBS that was established in the 1980s. Then in the 1980s onwards, Pairin and PBS were then strongly making their presence in Sabah politics. Under Pairin and PBS, state-federal relationship was in a tumultuous state. Pairin, thinking that he was speaking on behalf of Sabahans and the KD, stood up to voice out what he thought of as federal discrimination against Sabah and its people. Pairin's confrontational approach irked Dr. Mahathir. Dr. Mahathir considered Pairin's moves (in critically voicing out Sabah's so-called exclusive rights) as detrimental to Malaysia's political stability. The federal-state relationship vis-à-vis Pairin-Mahathir relationship had begun to whither and up to a certain point, irreconcilable. Obviously, the KD still rendered their support to the *huguon siou* and his political struggle. Soon after the 1990 general elections ended, Pairin had decided to pull out from BN and this action had changed the course of Sabah politics and more particularly the KD political direction. To support his action, Pairin blamed the Federal Government and Dr. Mahathir for failing to fulfil its demands which the latter regarded as too state-centric and detrimental to Malaysia's interests.

The PBS' dissention against the Federal Government and its sudden pull out from BN proved to be costly not just to Sabah but also to the KD. Dr. Mahathir's

next action was to wipe out Pairin and PBS from Sabah and Malaysian political landscapes. In trying to unleash this unprecedented action, Dr. Mahathir had used, whatever ways and means, various political strategies to materialise his plans without thinking of their far-reaching consequences in the future. It was also during Dr. Mahathir's tenure that Sabah politics, with regard to the KD political and socio-economic development, was surrounded by countless unexpected incidences epitomised by "underdevelopment, deep ethnic divisions, and the clash of overarching personalities" (Brown, 2004: pp. 232-239). In the early 2000s, nearly four decades after Sabah's inclusion into Malaysia, its economy had been growing inconsistently; and this was followed by a relatively high incidence of poverty since the 1980s (Jomo and Wee, 2002). For instance, the incidence of poverty in Sabah was 33.1 per cent in 1984, and 35.3 percent in 1987 than the national average of 20.7 percent, and 19.3 percent in the respective years. Mustapha Mohamad, the former Second Minister of Finance and executive director of the National Economic Council (NEAC) was quoted as saying, "(Sabah) now (is) in the same economic league as (my) native (state) Kelantan" (Lim, 2004). He attributed to a number of factors that had caused Sabah's economic backwardness such as "mismanagement of Sabah resources, disconcerted civil service and political situation" (*Ibid*). However, in the normative years in the 2000s, Sabah economy began to bounce back to progress economically.

After four decades in Malaysia, the KD can be said to be politically underrepresented and socio-economically backward. Further, the consequences of the various political changes experienced by the KD since 1960s had exacerbated in the 1980s period. This can be ostensibly seen after Dr. Mahathir rose to power in 1980s. First, there is now a huge division among the KD leaders. This division, if not narrowed, would lead to clashes at the grassroots level because of political differences. This situation was exacerbated after PBS' sudden pullout from BN in 1999. Part of this division was contributed by Dr. Mahathir where in 1991, he brought UMNO and tightened its hegemony in Sabah

politics. Dr. Mahathir also encouraged other KD leaders to join UMNO by offering them “various incentives” in the form of patronage funds and development promises ((Brown, 2004: pp. 232-239). Second, Dr. Mahathir had also given his “blessing” to the gradual disintegration of KD-based parties by supporting either the formation of new KD-based parties or encouraging KD leaders to join UMNO. The support given to PBS had since dwindled and fragmented. This had, by and large, made the KD’s position in Sabah politics weakened. The rotation system of the chief minister of Sabah which was suggested by Dr. Mahathir had also failed to represent the KD fairly and squarely. When the system was implemented in the 1990s, only Dompok managed to occupy the chief minister post but he was unable to finish his term due to his sudden defeat in the 1999 general elections. Again, when it comes to power sharing, the formula had failed to impartially represent each of the major ethnic group in Sabah. Obviously, the formula was one sided: representative from the *Muslim Bumiputera* occupied the chief minister post for four times (Sakaran Dandai (March-Dec, 1994), Salleh Said Keruak (Dec 1994-May 1996), Osu Sukam (March 14-March 2001), Musa Aman (March-2003-Now); Chinese representative two times (Yong Teck Lee (May 1996 – May 1998) and Chong Kah Kiat (March 17 2001 – March 26 2003) while the KD only once but without completing the stipulated term through Dompok (May 1998 – March 1999) (<http://www.sabah.org.my>). Later, Dr. Mahathir announced that representative from UMNO will have to occupy the chief minister post for two terms, after considering the fact that UMNO had the most number of seats in the state legislative assembly. This had reduced chances from either the Chinese and KD representatives to occupy the post as they have to wait until an UMNO representative finishes off his term for about four years⁵. Brown (2004) describes Dr. Mahathir’s move as “a subtle distortion of the original terms for the rotation, which was based on community representation rather than on party

⁵ A new eight-year system was suggested by Dr. Mahathir instead of six year previously. Apparently, the revision favoured *Muslim Bumiputera* representative who will hold the chief minister post for four years as compared to Chinese and KD representatives, two years each respectively. See Brown, Graham (2003). *Restraining Autonomy: Politics in Sabah during the Mahathir Years*. In Welsh, Bridget (2003). *Reflections: the Mahathir Years* (eds). pp. 232-239. Massachusetts: SAIS.

political power” (pp. 232-239). The Chinese and KD communities’ hopes of occupying the chief minister post was dashed when Abdullah Badawi, the new prime minister, announced that the rotation system will no longer be implemented in Sabah. Since then, Sabah politics has been controlled by UMNO.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The KD particularly their leaders have to rethink about their position in Sabah and Malaysia as a whole. Most importantly, they have to think of new strategies that could help them to be better recognised—politically and socio-economically—in Sabah and Malaysia. In this sense, overzealous parochial and communal politics have to be stopped and the KD leaders have to employ new approaches to make their presence felt and mattered in Malaysia. To achieve this, it is important for the KD leaders to unite and forget about their political differences. A merger between the three KD-based political parties is possible and this is very healthy not only to the KD but to the process of nation-building as well. And this effort to merge should be based on the holistic interests of the KD rather than focusing on one leader or party. Equally important too is the need for the KD leaders and professionals from various backgrounds to begin “soul-searching” activities to find out what went wrong and what needs to be done with regard to the KD political and socio-economic development. Indeed, when Donald Stephens stepped forward to represent the KD in the midst of the formation of the Malaysian Federation, we know for sure that his struggle was not only for the KD but for Sabah as a whole. He attempted to show the British and Federal Government that the KD’s presence was really mattered and not to be taken lightly. Later, after his sudden demise, Sabah politics had completely changed and painted quite negatively by overzealous parochial and communal politics, unnecessary ever changing leadership, appalling policies introduced by political leaders, aptly put by Dr. Mahathir, and to name a few. This was evident when Datu Mustapa, Harris Salleh, Pairin, and other “rotating chief ministers”, were in power. All of this has ostensibly contributed to Sabah’s inconsistent socio-economic development and the KD’s further marginalisation.

It is also important that the KD leaders maintain good relations with the Federal Government based on mutual understanding and goodwill. In their quest to address various issues affecting the KD people, they should not forget about national priorities which also includes the needs of other ethnic communities that form the multiethnic Malaysia. In a multiethnic country such as Malaysia, mutual tolerance and good communication between the KD leaders and Federal Government leaders are vital and must be maintained. Leaders from both levels should set up good political avenues to address issue concerning the state and country as a whole. While communal conflicts in Malaysia are somehow inevitable, the KD leaders should assist the Federal Government in maintaining national integrity and racial unity. On the other hand, the Federal Government leaders should also recognise the socio-economic needs of the KD. Political differences among the KD-based parties and their leaders should not be extended to the KD community. For instance, the KD should not be blamed for persistently supporting Pairin and PBS. Perhaps, PBS' struggle is more relevant to the KD people than that of UPKO's and PBRs'. Histories have shown that, after experiencing tumultuous years since its inception in 1985, PBS has survived and enjoyed enormous popularity from the KD people and other ethnic communities as well. Even if one looks at the political representation at Sabah's state legislative assembly (particularly after the 2004 general elections), PBS has outnumbered UPKO and PBRs in terms of allocation of seats and ministerial portfolios. This shows that certainly, Pairin and PBS, in the eyes of the KD, are still relevant in Sabah politics. Therefore, the Federal Government should not close one eye and blindly regard the KD as "rebellious" and anti-Federal Government. It is not the intention of this paper to be biased towards other KD-based parties. The above argument is sufficient to validate the thesis that PBS' struggle has been quite significant to the KD and their survival in Sabah politics.

Finally, throughout this paper, we have been discussing about the KD political change and socio-economic development from 1981 to 2003. The issues and

implications that we have just provided show that the KD leaders should begin establishing and setting out priorities for the their people. This of course should begin from the political leaders, professionals, community leaders, and extended to the KD at the grassroots level. If no one either from the political body, professional group, or the grassroots, takes this challenge to speak on behalf of the KD, then, the KD will be further sidelined not only in Sabah but Malaysia in general. Of course, when they want to embark into this journey, they should not just use their cultural background and constitutional rights that have been granted to them, they must also use their skills and wisdom to confront whatever challenges they would encounter in the future.

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