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advisory

IMAN Research

Analysing the
strength of rival
blocs

New State Government:
Post-Election
Negotiations



Based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, IMAN Research (legally registered as PanjiAlam Centre Sdn Bhd) is a think tank which focuses on security and socio-political matters. IMAN Research is spearheaded by experts with extensive local and international experience in the areas of management consultancy, social policy development, community resilience and engagement, particularly in the area of security, electoral reform, participatory urban redevelopment and psycho-social intervention within communities in conflict.

We concentrate in the domains of peace and security, ethnic relations and religious harmony. We aim to deliver sound policy solutions along with implementable action plans with measurable outcomes. To date, we have worked with Malaysian and foreign governments as well as the private sectors and international bodies, such as Google, UNICEF, UNDP and USAID, on issues ranging from security, elections to civil society empowerment.

In this advisory piece, IMAN delves into the outcome of this election by analysing the strengths and weaknesses of the two rival blocs - GRS and Warisan Plus, their respective victories and defeats, the current squabble over the CM's post, and what all of this means for the state's future. In truth, the numbers gained by the primary competitors in this election do not tell the full story of the complex political scenario in Sabah.

The results must be analysed from a demographic and ethnic perspective, while taking into consideration current issues and trends impacting sentiments at the grassroots level.

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Sabahans chart the state's future

ON SEPT 26, the power to determine Sabah's future fell on the shoulders of some 1.1 million registered voters in the state spread out across 73 constituencies. In the end, 66.6% of eligible voters came out to cast their ballots in an election that was adversely impacted by a drastic increase in COVID-19 infections across the state. As a result, the final voter turnout fell short of the 75% target initially estimated by the Election Commission (EC).

Nonetheless, a big chunk of Sabahans - including those based in the Peninsula - braved the COVID-19 risks just so they could exercise their democratic right in what proved to be a crucial election race. With Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) gaining victory, the dust may have since settled on this bitterly fought election. However, it does not spell an end to the greater political crisis in Sabah as the focus now shifts to the candidate for next Chief Minister.



Analysing the strength of rival blocs

AT THE ONSET of this election, Parti Warisan Sabah (Warisan) and its 'Plus' partners - UPKO, DAP, PKR and Amanah - agreed to retain their partnership and defend their status as the incumbent governing bloc. However, even a tried and tested partnership could not prevent a few internal disputes over seat negotiations and allocations. Eventually, seat distributions were ironed out and it was agreed that while Amanah and DAP used Warisan's logo, UPKO and PKR would use their own.

From the election results, it is evident that Warisan Plus' strongest asset this election was DAP, which won 6 out of the 7 seats it contested. Meanwhile, Warisan only bagged half (23) of the 46 seats it contested. UPKO was a weak link, winning only 1 of the 12 seats it contested while PKR also underperformed, capturing only 2 of its 7 contested seats. On the other hand, Amanah failed to win the solitary seat it contested in Tanjong Keramat.

Based on the demographic breakdown of the areas where Warisan Plus emerged victorious, it appears that they gained the most from major towns and cities, while losing significant support among rural constituents.

From an ethnic standpoint, the bulk of support for Warisan Plus came from Malay-Bumiputera dominated areas, compared to non Malay-Bumiputera dominated areas. In areas with more mixed ethnic compositions, such as Inanam, Api-Api, Kepayan and Elopura, Warisan Plus won with large majorities. A similar outcome was seen in Chinese dominated areas such as Likas, Luyang, Tanjong Papat and Sri Tanjong, where coalition partners DAP won convincingly. We can conclude

that Warisan Plus' influence in Sabah hinges on a favourable demographic and ethnic composition in the areas they contested.

The message of 'Unity' that its machinery drilled home during the election, coupled with the technologically savvy methods in disseminating the coalition's agenda showed that Warisan Plus were firmly champions of the digital campaign in this election. The digital campaign helped their supporters understand their manifesto and gain access to campaign material without getting directly involved in the physical campaign. As COVID-19 also limited public gatherings, this tactic ensured that the coalition maximised its campaign outreach among voters.

In contrast, GRS - comprising Barisan Nasional (BN), Perikatan Nasional (PN) and Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) - possessed an edge in this election due to its alignment to the Federal Government and the promise of greater Federal assistance if they were elected into power. PN iconised Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, using taglines such as "Abah Kita Bah" to endear itself to voters. And it ultimately worked.

Based on the ethnic composition of the constituencies, the majority of voters in the areas won by GRS are from non Malay-Bumiputera (NMB) and Malay-Bumiputera (MB) categories. The pact did not make as much inroads among mixed voters and in Chinese dominated areas. Crucially, GRS made big gains among rural constituents - which proved to be the difference as they defeated Warisan Plus. ■

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WARISAN +

PKR, DAP, UPKO, Amanah

BN + PN + PBS

Kudat (North Coast)

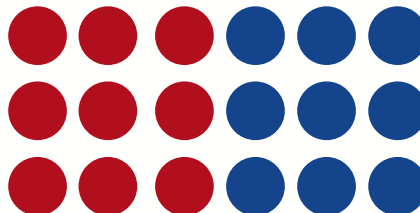
Banggi N01
Tanjong Kapor N04



Bengkoka N02
Matunggong N05
Bandau N06
Tandek N07

West Coast

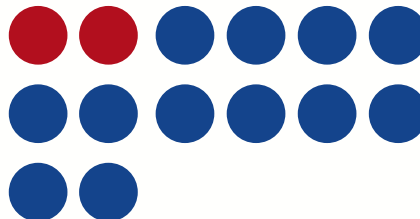
Kadamian N11
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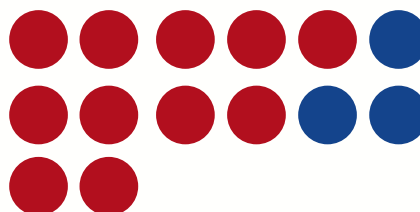
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NEW STATE GOVERNMENT

Post-Election Negotiations

GRS' SIMPLE MAJORITY win had brought up another quandary in the post-election period, in terms of deciding who would be the next Chief Minister. BN, a partner in the GRS bloc, was firmly of the belief that its candidate - Datuk Seri Bung Moktar Radin (Sabah BN chief) - should be the next CM. This was echoed by BN chairman Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, especially as Umno-BN had stepped aside for Bersatu in the squabble over the Perak Menteri Besar post not too long ago.

However, another name that cropped up at the eleventh hour was that of Datuk Hajiji Noor, the Bersatu state chief, who received the backing of Muhyiddin. There were also rumours and speculation that Warisan Plus was engineering a move to get the independent assemblymen and several others on their side in a bid to form the next state government. Warisan noted that it had the single highest number of seats as a party, and should be given first priority to form the government. It also accused GRS of being an invalid coalition as it was not registered with the Registrar of Societies (RoS). Ultimately, their ploy failed to materialise, with former CM Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal having no choice but to accept defeat.

Meanwhile, the squabble within GRS has now abated, with Bung eventually stepping aside for Hajiji - albeit reluctantly. Hajiji was sworn in as the new Chief Minister on Sept 29, while Bung and two others - STAR president Datuk Jeffrey Kitingan and PBS vice-president Datuk Joachim Gunsalam were appointed his deputies. Normalcy may have now resumed in this long-drawn election saga, but there is also a sense that the new administration is in a precarious position given the increasingly strained ties among the GRS partners.

The voting numbers from the election indicate that BN could likely dominate the GRS pact in the near future. With that, it remains to be seen how much longer they will tolerate playing second fiddle to Bersatu, which does not enjoy as much support in Sabah. The uneasy relationship between Bersatu and BN was already on display prior to nomination day, as both parties were initially unable to reach a compromise on seat allocations. However, forming GRS was beneficial to both parties as it avoided a scenario where they were forced to stand on their own in Sabah. The partnership, however inconvenient, was instrumental in stopping Warisan in its tracks.

Notably, none of the local parties such as Parti Cinta Sabah (PCS), USNO, and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) were able to win a single seat in this election. It goes to show that voters still prefer parties that are more well-established and have greater national presence, maybe because they are better positioned to preserve the wellbeing of Sabahans. However, the mushrooming of local parties in this election is testament to a healthy democratic process and much-needed 'check and balance' in the state, especially with GE15 looming on the horizon.

As at time of writing, a lot of things can still happen and have yet to happen in this post-election period. The political dynamics in Sabah are fluid and hard to predict, and it remains anyone's guess what situation will transpire in the coming days.



Photo credit: Lin

One certainty, however, is that despite initial fears about internal and external security threats, this election took place without any untoward incidents. Our security personnel worked tirelessly on guaranteeing the safety of voters on polling day, with surveillance teams being mobilised on the streets and near voting centres. This ensured that voters were able to freely execute their democratic right.

Due to rising COVID-19 infections, strict procedures were observed at all 741 polling centres across the state. An exponential rise in cases in recent days has fuelled rumours of a lockdown, with those returning to the Peninsula already being made to undergo mandatory home quarantine. It is an interesting yet concerning time for all Sabahans as they adjust to the new state government and also a potential lockdown, especially in major towns and cities that have turned into red zones - namely Kota Kinabalu, Lahad Datu, Semporna, Tawau, Sandakan, and Kunak. IMAN shall continue to monitor developments in the state in the coming month.

In light of the recent surge in case, we would also like to remind all Malaysians to be extra vigilant, practice the necessary SOPs when out in public, and maintain good personal hygiene. ■



Photo credit: Asrin Utong



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