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ETHNIC FACTOR IN THE 2008 MALAYSIAN GENERAL ELECTION: THE CASE OF THE KADAZAN DUSUN (KD) IN SABAH

Observers have noted that the election results in Peninsular Malaysia indicate the major swing of the ethnic votes to the opposition. This is shown by the fact that the Malay-Muslim voters have turned their support from UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) to PKR (Parti Keadilan Rakyat) or PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia). The same goes to the ethnic Chinese and Indians who have swung their votes to DAP (Democratic Action Party) or PKR, resulting in MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) to lose badly in the elections. But the scenario is totally different in Sabah where the majority ethnic group the Kadazandusun have maintained their support to the BN despite the opposition's claim that it has won the Kadazandusun votes just before the election. For some, this is indeed surprising as the Kadazandusun are formerly known as strong opposition supporters through the Kadazandusun-based PBS (Parti Bersatu Sabah). This article explains why the Kadazandusun maintain their support to the BN (Barisan Nasional) and why the opposition has failed to win their votes.

Keyword: Kadazandusun (KD), Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), Huguang Siou.

Para pemerhati sependapat bahawa pilihan raya di Semenanjung Malaysia menunjukkan arah pengundian yang lebih berpihak kepada parti pembangkang. Ini berasaskan fakta yang pengundi Melayu beragama Islam merubah undi mereka dari UMNO kepada PKR atau PAS. Perkara yang sama berlaku dalam kelompok pengundi etnik Cina dan India yang mengundi DAP atau PKR dan menyebabkan MCA mengalami kekalahan teruk dalam pilihan raya ini. Walau bagaimanapun senario politik berbeza di Sabah yang kumpulan etnik majoriti Kadazandusun, telah mengekalkan sokongan mereka kepada BN walaupun pembangkang mendakwa telah menguasai kumpulan etnik ini. Keadaan ini mengejutkan kerana selama ini Kadazandusun kuat menyokong parti pembangkang seperti ditunjukkan dalam parti PBS. Artikel ini menjelaskan mengapa Kadazandusun menyokong BN dan mengapa pembangkang gagal mendapatkan undi daripada mereka.

Katakunci: Kadazandusun (KD), Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), Huguang Siou.

Introduction

Malaysia is known for its multi-racial and multi-religious society. Through the different phases of Malaysian political history, political parties have evolved over time along ethnic and religious considerations (Brown 2005). It is observed that political parties in Malaysia have survived due to their success in playing up ethnic related issues. This is obvious in Peninsular Malaysia where the three ethnically based political parties namely UMNO, MCA and MIC have continuously over the years tried to win the support of their respective communities. In Sabah and Sarawak, the pattern of political party arrangement is almost identical to that of Peninsular Malaysia.

In Sabah, the role of ethnicity (indigenous versus non-indigenous) in a semi-competitive political party system is not as strong as in Peninsular Malaysia where the competition between the indigenous and non-indigenous political parties is obvious. The competition between political parties in Sabah normally falls not along ethnic lines but along the interests of the different individual political party leaders, both at inter and intra levels. Though the political conflict between the different ethnic groups in Sabah has never been as clear-cut as in Peninsular Malaysia, ethnic politics has always been a salient factor. Ethnic politics can be understood simply as the contests for and manipulations of political power along ethnic lines by a group of political actors and political parties (Horowitz 2000; Andersen and Heath 2000).

The 2008 general elections show yet once again how the survival of political parties in Malaysia is depended upon the support of the particular ethnic groups except that in some cases ethnic voting is no longer as decisive. The election results in Peninsular Malaysia is particularly surprising because the largest ethnic group there, the Malays, had begun to look beyond UMNO and had shifted their support to the multiracial PKR (ASLI 2008). The same goes to the Chinese and Indians who also shifted their support to either PKR or DAP. It was found out that the popular votes obtained by UMNO were just 35.5 per cent compared to PAS/PKR combined 34.8 per cent (ASLI 2008).

The UMNO even lost in urban and semi-urban Malay seats such as Titiwangsa and Lembah Pantai (in Kuala Lumpur), Shah Alam, Hulu Langat, Kuala Langat, Kuala Selangor, Gombak, Ampang, Sungai Petani, Merbok, Kulim, Nibong Tebal, Balik Pulau (in Penang), Parit Buntar and Bagan Serai in Perak (ASLI 2008). The MCA and MIC were almost wiped out when the Chinese and Indians voted for either DAP or PKR. The DAP's propaganda that a vote for MCA and GERAKAN would mean a vote for UMNO proved to be successful in turning away the Chinese voters from voting the Chinese BN parties.

In Sabah, the situation is almost the same as in Peninsular Malaysia except that the largest ethnic group, the Kadazandusun (or KD as they will be referred to throughout this article), chose not to vote for the opposition led by PKR despite their past experience as strong supporters to the then opposition PBS (Parti Bersatu Sabah). Despite the perceived "protest votes" emanating from the Chinese and Indian voters who were not satisfied with the way the prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi handled certain ethnic related issues, the KD voters were not unduly perturbed and gave their votes to the BN. The article explains why the KD maintain their support to the BN and why the opposition has failed to win them over. It argues that the KD voting pattern cannot be explained

simply within the context of the present political situation as their past political experiences and cultural background are also important in order to explain their voting behaviour.

Kadazandusun Political Change

The KD has been represented by numerous political parties since the formation of Malaysia in 1963. According to *Yearbook of Statistics Sabah* (2004), the KD make up about 17.97 per cent of the total population in Sabah, making them the biggest ethnic group (Table 1). But politically, the KD has not been able to exert any political control except from 1985 to 1994 under the PBS. But PBS could not be said to be a predominantly KD party when it was formed in 1985 as though the large bulk of its membership composition comprised urban and rural KD, the Muslim and Chinese presence in the party then was significantly strong. But as time passed by and the Malaysian politics changed, the PBS's multiracial outlook had gradually eroded partly because of its failure to maintain its Chinese and Muslim support and the BN's action in imposing a Peninsular political dichotomy in Sabah.

Table 1: Mid-Year Population Estimates By Ethnic Group, Sabah (2004)

Ethnic Group	Number	Percentage
<i>Malaysian Citizens</i>		
Malay	330,600	11.55
Kadazandusun	514,400	17.97
Bajau	381,500	13.32
Murut	94,000	3.28
Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	421,700	14.73
Chinese	277,300	9.68
Others	138,000	4.82
Sub-Total	2,157,500	75.38
<i>Non-Malaysian Citizens</i>		
	704,800	24.62
Total Population	2,862,300	100

Source: *Yearbook of Statistics Sabah* (2004)

The first party which represented the KD in Sabah was UNKO (United National Kadazan Organisation) led by the first KD *Huguan Siou* (Paramount Leader), Donald Stephens. The UNKO later merged with the rural-based Pasok Momugun to form UPKO (United Pasok Momugun Kadazan Organisation). The UPKO since became a formidable force for the KD to exert their political influence. The UPKO together with the Muslim-based USNO (United Sabah National Organisation), the Chinese-based SCA (Sabah Chinese Association) and SIC (Sabah Indian Congress) formed a coalition the Sabah Alliance and became the first government to rule Sabah after the formation of Malaysia in 1963 (Luping 1994; Ongkili 1989: 61-79 & 1967). The Sabah Alliance's rule, however, was

short-lived after the fallout between Stephens and USNO's founder Mustapha Harun. The UPKO was pushed into the political periphery for a certain period of time until Stephens made a plea for the KD members of UPKO to dissolve the party to join USNO for the sake of unity¹.

Following Mustapha's fallout with the Federal Government, the KD political fortune took a different turn again. Stephens saw the opportunity to team up with the Federal Government under the then prime minister Abdul Razak to topple the USNO Government. With Abduk Razak's endorsement, a new party BERJAYA (Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah) was formed and Stephens was entrusted to lead it (Han 1979: 379-389). The KD shifted their support en masse to BERJAYA and they saw this opportunity to come into power again after years of being marginalised by the Mustapha regime. However, the KD's hope was dashed after Stephens's sudden demise in an air crash off Sembulan in 1976. A Muslim, Harris Salleh took over from Stephens as president of BERJAYA and Sabah's chief minister.

The more pro-federal Salleh undertook a number of policies which were unacceptable to the KD. The KD thought that Harris was out to destroy their cultural significance. Being a strong "federal man" (as many in Sabah have called him), Harris was determined to project a more "Malay outlook" of the Sabah Government after being pressurized by the Federal Government to do so. The KD was obviously unhappy. Joseph Pairin Kitingan, a young KD leader in Harris's cabinet, rose to challenge the latter resulting in the former being sacked from BERJAYA. The battle between the two leaders continued when a by-election was announced in Pairin's stronghold in Tambunan. Harris suffered his first major setback when the BERJAYA candidate lost in Tambunan to Pairin. Pairin's popularity grew and Harris became more determined to end Pairin's political career as quickly as the latter's influence had grown tremendously among the grassroots.

Harris called for a snap election in 1985 so as to ensure the new party formed by Pairin, PBS, did not have the means to expand its grassroots support. The PBS, however, won the election. The KD clearly threw their support to PBS, owing much to Pairin's status as the new emerging champion of the KD. Pairin became the chief minister and the KD were returned into their former glory. The PBS renewed its outstanding electoral performance in the 1986 elections during which the BERJAYA was ousted. PBS ruled Sabah until 1994 when rampant crossovers caused its downfall (Chin 1994: 904-915). The PBS became the main opposition party in Sabah until it was re-admitted into the BN in 2002.

Sabah politics has since been controlled by UMNO which entered into Sabah, again with strong federal influence in 1991 (Chin 1994: 904-915; Chin 1999: 20-40; Mohd Agus 2006 and Ross-Larson 1977). This federal influence is marked by the Federal Government's "repressive-responsive" attitude towards Sabah (Crouch 1996). An example of its repressive attitude is when several PBS leaders were arrested under questionable circumstances at the height of the federal-state conflict from 1991-1994 (Mohd Agus 2006 and Chin 1997: 96-120). The Federal Government's responsive

¹ It is clear, from the stand point of some observers, that Stephens's action to join USNO was politically motivated (Luping 1994)

attitude can be seen in the context of its action in responding to the wishes of the Sabahan people such as the introduction of the two-year rotation system of the chief minister post.

Chin (1999: 20-40), however, suggests that the repressive-responsive thesis “is only partly applicable to Sabah” because what the Federal Government really wants to see is a direct electoral competition between the Muslim and non-Muslim electorate. When UMNO came to Sabah, it imposed “the peninsular political dichotomy of *Malay/non-Malay Bumiputera/non-Bumiputera Muslim/non-Muslim Bumiputera*, over the existing triangular situation (*Muslim Bumiputera, non-Muslim Bumiputera, Chinese*) in Sabah politics” (Chin 1999: 40). This is particularly true as Sabah has seen its electoral boundaries deliberately changed so many times to increase the Muslim’s (and UMNO’s) electoral power.

Prior to the 2008 elections, the political configurations in Sabah clearly showed that UMNO was holding the real power. It controlled 32 seats in the state legislative assembly followed by PBS 13, UPKO five, SAPP (Sabah People’s Progressive Party) four, LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) three, MCA one, PBRs (Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah) one and Independent one. The deliberate changes also known as gerrymandering made in the electoral map have partially ensured UMNO’s political dominance (Jomo 1996: 90-113 and Loh 2003: 228-252). For instance in 2004, several new seats were introduced to the advantage of UMNO in the mainly *Malay-Muslim* areas.² The changes had increased UMNO’s seats from 22 in 1999 to 32 in 2004. The second biggest party in the state assembly, PBS, appeared to be affected by the changes when the Pensiangan and Sembulan seats it won in 1999 were dropped from the electoral map. The changes also reduced PBS’s influence in *Muslim* areas while at the same time re-affirmed its control in KD areas.

Pre Election Scenario

During campaigning, an opposition candidate related how the KD community had shown their displeasure towards BN in Sabah (Jurin W. Gunsalam 2008, pers. comm., March 10, 2008). They were said to be dissatisfied by the way the KD-based parties perform in the UMNO-dominated state assembly. A number of issues closely related to the KD such as poverty in rural areas and NCR (Native Customary Rights) land had not been addressed properly by the KD leaders. In a random interview conducted by a local newspaper, it was found out that a substantial number of voters in the predominantly KD area of Tenom wanted a change in the state administration. They said they wanted the BN leader representing their area be changed as he failed to bring much development. They also said they had nothing to lose if they vote for the opposition as many of the promises made by the BN during the 2004 general elections remained unfulfilled (*Daily Express*, February 17, 2008).

The KD community wanted a strong opposition voice in the state assembly as they thought this is necessary to ensure the Sabah UMNO does not abuse its powers. But the inability of PBS and other KD-based parties to assume the role made the KD people anxious and they were serious in wanting to change the government. Due to the strong

² The new seats were Karambunai, Membakut, Gum-Gum, Tungku, Bugaya, Apas, and Sebatik.

sentiments on the ground, the opposition was confident that it could win the votes of the KD voters.

The maverick KD leader, Jeffrey Kitingan led the campaign to bring a new lease of life to opposition politics in Sabah. He launched his political comeback in a truly dramatic fashion in Tambunan during which the Tambunan Declaration was announced. The Declaration, among other things, sought to return the rights of Sabahans such as the right to more oil royalty, greater representation in the federal cabinet and civil service, the return of the Federal Territory of Labuan to Sabah, and the appointment of a second deputy prime minister from Sabah should the PKR win the election (*The Star*, February 27, 2008). For some, Jeffrey's decision to choose Tambunan is because he wanted to imitate Pairin's rise in 1985 after Tambunan was abrogated from its district status by the BERJAYA Government.

The incidence in Tambunan paved the way for Pairin to form PBS which later took control of Sabah politics until its downfall in 1994. Jeffrey chose PKR as his new party platform because he said the party is sympathetic to the Sabah problems and that he is willing to help Sabah PKR realizes its political aspiration. Some KD were convinced of Jeffrey's political struggles despite people calling him "katak" (political frog) for his penchant of hopping from one political party to another (Chin 1999). His election records speak volumes of his substantial influence among the KD people.

Much of the campaign launched by Jeffrey revolved around the alleged economic monopoly and malpractices of the Musa administration (Welsh 2008). More than 80 police reports were lodged by Jeffrey, alleging Musa's misuse of power as Sabah's chief minister (*Malaysia Today* 2008). Despite the presence of PKR and internal political squabble within the state BN ranks, the BN was set to win without any major challenge because it appeared that the BN KD based parties were still popular among the KD people. The opposition appeared to be at loggerheads over seats allocation. For instance, the names submitted by Jeffrey was said to be overtaken by those submitted by Sabah PKR liaison chief Ansari Abdullah. This resulted in Jeffrey's supporters contesting as independents. The election saw 807,862 eligible voters of which 13,414 or about 1.7 per cent was postal voters.

Candidates and Parties

The BN applied almost the same formula as in 2004, contesting in 25 parliamentary and 60 state seats. The BN KD parties in Sabah consisted of PBS, UPKO and PBRS. PBS and UPKO were allocated two seats respectively while UMNO and PBRS one seat each. At the parliamentary level, the BN contested in all six KD seats namely Kota Marudu, Penampang, Ranau, Keningau, Tenom and Pensiangan.

But on the eve of nomination day, the Pensiangan seat was won by the BN when the PKR candidate was disqualified for "technical reason". All eyes were directed at Penampang which saw the return of Bernard Dompok to contest the seat. The other hot seat was in Keningau which saw Pairin being challenged by his own brother Jeffrey. The opposition chose to contest in all parliamentary seats but the high number of independent candidates contesting in the same seats reduced the chances for the opposition to deny the BN a huge majority win.

At the state level, the PBS was allocated seven KD seats, followed by UPKO four seats and UMNO and PBRs one each. The PBS contested in Matunggong, Tandek, Kadamaian, Tamparuli, Kiulu, Kundasang and Tambunan while UPKO in Moyog, Paginatan, Bingkor and Nabawan. UMNO contested in Kemabong while PBRs in Sook.

There was also this issue of the PBS renegeing on its promise to retain all of the party's 13 state and four parliamentary incumbents. Pairin said he decided to retain the incumbents as he did not want to "rock the boat" (*Daily Express*, February 22, 2008). However, at the eleventh hour during nomination, Pairin made a surprise move by dropping the incumbent for Matunggong Jornah Mozihim despite offering her an appointment letter to contest earlier. Pairin was believed to have been advised by his deputy Maximus not to field Jornah as her supporters in Matunggong had supported the then independent candidate in the 2004 general election.

In the battle to wrest the parliamentary seat of Kota Marudu which consisted of Matunggong and Tandek, the independent candidate Anthony Mandiau managed to collect well more than 7000 votes believed to be mainly from Matunggong. Many see Maximus' action as an attempt to "punish" Jornah for failing to deliver the votes from Matunggong (*Daily Express*, March 7, 2008). The number of independent candidates increased to 18 from 13 in 2004 at the parliamentary level while at the state level, a total of 57 candidates contested.

Campaign and Issues

Before we examine the election issues in the KD areas, it is important to see the issues at national level. Like during the previous elections, the BN was banking on the development rhetoric in its campaigns by bringing forward the slogan of "Peace, Safe and Progress". The BN's campaign boasted the achievements of the Abdullah administration in the last four years. These included the high economic growth as reflected in the growth of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of 8 per cent from RM427 million to RM504 billion.

In Sabah, the people were reminded of the government's seriousness in developing the state through the establishment of Sabah Development Corridor (SDC) which promised to provide 900,000 jobs, involving an investment of RM105 billion in the next 18 years. The BN also presented a progress report of the State BN from 2004-2007 (*Daily Express*, February 27, 2008 and *The Borneo Post*, March 7, 2008).

The same old tactic of providing on-the-spot grants was also employed by the BN (Puyok 2007: 64-79). During Musa's visit to the interior area of Sipitang, he officiated the launching of the new cultural centre of the Lundayeh community. He even gave RM100, 000 to the Sabah Lundayeh Cultural Association³. Some in the community charged that this is clearly an attempt to win the votes of the Lundayeh people who have been long known as strong supporters to the opposition (anonymous, pers. comm., June 13, 2008).

Another instance was in Kota Marudu where the PBS incumbent Maximus Ongkili gave RM250 each to 93 pupils of *Sekolah Kebangsaan Mangaris* through the Education Ministry's *Kumpulan Wang Amanah Pelajar Termiskin* (KWAPM or Poor Students Trust Group) (*The Borneo Post*, March 7, 2008). Even though Maximus refuted

³ The figure has been confirmed by an insider who attended the function.

the opposition's claim that the fund was used as a campaign tool, a source claimed that the fund had been misused by the former for political expediency (anonymous, pers. comm., March 10, 2008). It appeared that the fund was also distributed in Nabawan by Keningau UMNO chief Abdul Ghani Mohd Yassin, involving 233 and 188 pupils respectively in two schools—*Sekolah Kebangsaan Kampung Bahagia* and *Sekolah Kebangsaan Binakan* in Sook (*Daily Express*, March 7, 2008).

Nationally, the DAP campaigned along the tagline “Just Change It” in which it promised to give a bonus of up to RM6000 per family for households earning RM6000 or less per annum. The money spent on the bonus would be taken from Petronas' profit of RM70 billion. The DAP also promised to ensure adequate water supply and a provision to mobilize 100,000 police personnel to patrol the streets to reduce the number of rising criminal cases.

The PKR's manifesto, “A New Dawn for Malaysia”, aimed “to end race-based discrimination policies, lower fuel prices and fight corruption” (*The Borneo Post*, February 27, 2009). In Sabah, the PKR and DAP took the BN to task by claiming that under the BN, the people's NCR lands are completely wiped out after the BN amended the Sabah Land Ordinance (*Daily Express*, March 7, 2008). The DAP went on by saying that “land-grabbing” in Sabah was at its worst” (*Daily Express*, February 27, 2008). The PKR promised to preserve the natives' rights while the DAP vowed to return the NCR lands to the people who have been occupying them for generations (*Daily Express*, February 27, 2008).

In KD areas, the opposition played out the “Wind of Change” slogan, asking the voters to “*tukaron bangkad*” (change the shirt-- meaning to change their support from BN to the opposition). This was particularly evident in rural areas such as in Keningau (*Daily Express*, March 2, 2008). The opposition also questioned Pairin's effectiveness in voicing out the people's problems. In one instance, the PKR claimed that Pairin was no longer needed by the KD community (*Daily Express*, March 7, 2008). The opposition believed that the KD was not happy with the BN and especially PBS whom they have long supported since the party's inception in 1985.

For some, the PBS's role as “champion” of the KD people was no longer felt as Pairin was considered as a “BN man” who is now singing a different tune (Welsh 2008a). Jeffry, who was challenging Pairin in Keningau even went to the offensive by saying that it is time for Pairin to quit as “he is now sounding more like the UMNO leaders when he is telling his own people that the development will stop if they do not vote for BN”. The message that the opposition was trying to convey was that it is time for Pairin to concentrate on his role as the cultural leader of the KD in his capacity as *Huguan Siou* and president of KDCA.

It appeared that the PBS was trying to avoid campaigning along the issues of state and KD rights. It preferred to remind the KD of the sufferings experienced by them when the PBS was in the opposition. The PBS pleaded the KD voters to return the BN to power as it had brought about many developments in Sabah. The UPKO brought the same message of continuity and development. But compared to PBS, the UPKO made it clear that it is the only KD party in Sabah that is capable of looking after the affairs of the KD people. Of all the KD-based parties, the UPKO's KD sentiment is the most explicit.

Analysing the Voting Pattern

At the national level, the BN suffered a major setback after failing to retain its two-thirds majority win. It only obtained 49 per cent of the popular votes cast compared to the opposition 51 per cent (ASLI 2008 and Welsh 2008b). Of all the 140 seats the BN won, 54 came from Sabah and Sarawak. So without the contribution of Sabah and Sarawak, the BN would not have obtained a simple majority. The opposition also managed to increase its seats in the parliament from 12 previously to 82 this time around. The BN, however, won impressively in Sabah and Sarawak. Of all the 25 parliamentary and 60 state seats contested in Sabah, the BN won 24 and 59 respectively. In Sarawak, the opposition was clearly decimated where it only won one seat in its stronghold in Bandar Kuching compared to the BN 30 seats.

The BN won all the six parliamentary seats in KD areas including in Pensiangan where it was won uncontested by Joseph Kurup of PBRs. In terms of popular votes, the BN obtained 58.68 per cent compared to the combined opposition votes 36.40 per cent. Both the BN and opposition had their share of popular votes dropped by 1.2 and 3.71 per cent respectively (Table 2). In 2004, the BN obtained 59.88 per cent while the opposition and independents combined obtained 40.11 per cent. The BN component parties of PBS and UPKO shared the number of popular votes at 24.55 per cent and 25.33 per cent respectively while UMNO only 8.79 per cent. The large bulk of the opposition votes went to PKR (35.02 per cent), followed by BERSEKUTU (0.86 per cent) and DAP (0.51 per cent). The remaining 4.91 per cent went to the independent candidates.

Table 2: Share of the Popular Votes According to Constituency Type at the Parliamentary Level

Constituency type (parliament)	Popular vote (%)		Difference
	BN	Opposition	
<i>Kadazandusun (non-Muslim Bumiputera)</i>	58.68 (59.88)*	36.40 (40.11)	-1.2/-3.71
Chinese	35.62 (56.32)	57.41 (43.65)	-20.7/13.76
<i>Malay/Muslim (Muslim Bumiputera)</i>	66.06 (69.55)	27.25 (30.41)	-3.49/-3.16
Mixed	62.14 (70.63)	36.27 (29.35)	-8.49/6.92

Note: * The figures in bracket represent the popular votes obtained in 2004

Source: various newspaper reports in *Daily Express* and *The Borneo Post* as well as reports from the Malaysian Election Commission (http://semak.spr.gov.my/spr/laporan/5_KeputusanKeseluruhan.php. Retrieved on June 12, 2008)

Table 3: Share of the Popular Votes According to Constituency Type at the State Level

Constituency type (parliament)	Popular vote (%)		Difference
	BN	Opposition	
<i>Kadazandusun (non-Muslim Bumiputera)</i>	59.81 (59.88)*	34.56 (40.11)	-0.07/-5.55
Chinese	53 (68.91)	49.99 (31.08)	-15.91/18.91
<i>Malay/Muslim (Muslim Bumiputera)</i>	68.78 (66.26)	27.58 (33.73)	2.52/-6.15
Mixed	51.24 (70.63)	40.69 (n.a.)	-19.39/n.a.

Note: * The figures in bracket represent the popular votes obtained in 2004

Source: various newspaper reports in *Daily Express* and *The Borneo Post* as well as reports from the Malaysian Election Commission ([http://semak.spr.gov.my/spr/laporan/5 KeputusanKeseluruhan.php](http://semak.spr.gov.my/spr/laporan/5%20KeputusanKeseluruhan.php). Retrieved on June 12, 2008)

At the state level, the BN won all the 13 KD seats, collecting about 59.81 per cent of the popular votes compared to the opposition combined, 34.56 per cent (Table 3). In 2004, the BN obtained 57.88 per cent of the popular votes while the opposition 42.09 per cent. At the individual party level, the PKR managed to collect about 33.59 per cent compared to the PBS 32.91 per cent. The share of the votes obtained by UPKO and PBRS is just 17.54 per cent and 4.82 per cent respectively.

Interestingly, the opposition could have denied the BN a huge majority in a number of areas had it been successful in persuading the independent candidates not to contest. For example in Tandek, the combined votes of the PKR candidate with that of the independent's and BERSEKUTU's could have reduced the BN's majority to just 245⁴. In Bingkor, Jeffrey could have won the seat had the independent chosen not to contest. The BN's majority in Bingkor is only 122. In 2004, Jeffrey was almost able to wrest the seat from Kurup with a 143-vote difference.

The results show that the KD voters did not totally reject the opposition's brand of politics which some quarters say as irrelevant to local people. But one cannot deny the fact that the KD voters want local-based parties such as PBS and UPKO to represent them at the federal level. At the state level, the opposition performed slightly better on an individual party basis, looking at the number of popular votes it obtained (33.59 per cent) compared to the major BN KD-based party, PBS, 32.01 per cent.

This could be attributed to two reasons. First, many saw PBS as gradually losing its image as "champion" to the KD and state rights. They might want an opposition voice in the state assembly which the PBS failed to provide. Second, Pairin's silence on a number of pressing local issues such as fake ICs and illegal immigrants since becoming a "BN man" (as the opposition called him) has slightly affected his reputation as *Huguan Siou* (Paramount Leader). Jeffrey's scathing attack on Pairin's character as well as his

⁴ The PKR candidate in Tandek said that among the reasons for his defeat were lack of finance to fund his campaign activities and short campaigning period (Jurin Gunsalam 2008, pers. comm., March 18)

revelation of Musa's alleged corrupt practices might contribute to the swing of the KD votes.

The KD voters who remained loyal to PBS were those who were sympathetic to PBS's struggles. They were adamant to vote for the opposition as they thought the PBS could fight for their rights effectively using the BN as a platform. They also had no choice but to support PBS and other BN KD parties because the PKR is an outsider party that does not understand fully the dynamics of local politics.

All the BN KD parties campaigned along the issues of development and continuity. The PBS chose to depart from its strong KD outlook while UPKO emerged to "new" champion to the KD community. The UPKO vowed to fight for the KD rights as it is the only "pure" KD party in the state. It even stated that it had "[stuck] its neck out" in speaking about the KD problems. The PBS, long associated with the KD, chose to "play it safe" as it has painful experience being in the opposition until it was re-admitted into BN in 2002. The PBRs's electoral strength particularly at the parliamentary level is generally untested because it won the Pensiangan seat uncontested.

Despite the win, the PBRs president Joseph Kurup would have to face a lot of uncertainties ahead as there is a strong possibility that a by-election would be called in Pensiangan⁵. Unlike in Pairin's and Dompok's case, Kurup had to choose the "hard way" to remain in power, that is, not to re-nominate the popular incumbent in Pensiangan Bernard Maraat whom he saw as the type of leader "who likes to work alone". At one time, Maraat vowed to contest as an independent but only to change his mind later. To say which among the KD-based parties that is more popular among the KD voters warrant another close observation but PBS has the advantage because many KD still regard Pairin as a symbol of unity and strength due to his role as *Huguan Siou* and president of the Kadazandusun Cultural Association (KDCA) (Luping 1984: 83-87).

Failure of the Tambunan Declaration?

For some KD, there is much hope for them when Jeffrey launched the Tambunan Declaration which later became part of the Sabah PKR campaign manifesto under the theme "Justice for Sabahans". The launching, they thought, would give them the opportunity to once again come into the political limelight they once had during Donald Stephens' and Pairin's times. But it would appear that a major portion of the KD people was not convinced with Jeffrey who chose PKR as his new political platform. For this KD group, PKR is a "*semenanjung*" (peninsular) party and what they wanted is a purely local-based opposition party to provide strong opposition voice in Sabah.

They regarded Anwar Ibrahim the *de facto* PKR leader as someone who was instrumental in toppling down the PBS Government in 1994. For them, Anwar is no more than a political opportunist and he used Jeffrey to expand his influence in Sabah.

⁵The opposition candidate who had been disqualified to contest in Pensiangan due to "technical reason" filed an election petition, challenging Kurup's victory. He also claimed that his disqualification was the act of sabotage. When the result was announced by the EC officer, Kurup had to be whisked away from the nomination centre to avoid from being hurt by the angry crowd (*Daily Express*, February 26, 2008).

The contents of the Tambunan Declaration may be appealing to some KD but they were not convinced that Sabah PKR was capable enough to pursue them. Moreover, the lackadaisical attitude shown by the PKR leadership to the Tambunan Declaration signals the fact that PKR is not ready to allow Sabahans to chart their own political future (Kanul Gindol 2008, pers. comm., June 25). Anwar and PKR president Wan Azizah Ismail did not show total commitment to the Declaration as they were afraid they are not able to exert control on Sabah if the PKR wins the elections (Kanul Gindol 2008, pers. comm., June 25)⁶. Due to these reasons, grassroots KD felt that it would be pointless to vote for the opposition if it is not committed to fight for the state and KD rights.

PBS, the KDCA and *Huguan Siou* Factor

For some KD, they had no choice but to vote for the PBS, simply because they were no other alternative political parties in Sabah that could bring their voices to the mainstream political development. Since its inception in 1985, the PBS has been projecting its image as a strong KD-based party. In electoral terms, PBS's survival is mainly contributed by the KD voters who give the party their consistent support in particular at the state level.

In 1985, for instance, of the 45 seats contested, PBS won 14 KD seats compared to USNO and BERJAYA, one seat each. The PBS only won one of 16 Muslim seats and five of seven Chinese seats. In 1986, the similar voting pattern occurred except that PBS managed to obtain more Chinese and Muslim seats.

In 1990, PBS repeated its success in winning all the 17 KD seats, seven Chinese seats and four Muslim seats. In 1994, in what was regarded as a close fight between the then opposition PBS and BN, PBS only managed to scrape through with only 25 seats compared to BN 23. The PBS managed to retain all the 16 KD seats, lost three Chinese seats and retained the four Muslim seats. In an attempt to reduce the PBS's power in KD majority seats, BN allowed the re-delineation of the electoral boundaries which enabled UMNO to gain the upper hand in Muslim areas.

In 1999, the PBS won ten KD seats, three Chinese seats and one Muslim seat. But PBS's share of the popular votes (58 per cent) in KD areas indicated that it was still a preferred party among the KD compared to BN, 39 per cent. In 2004, more Muslim majority areas were created and UMNO became a dominant party with 32 seats compared to 22 in 1999. This had reduced PBS's influence in Muslim areas while at the same time re-affirmed its control in KD areas.

The fact that the opposition was not able to weaken the KD support of PBS indicated that Pairin's role as *Huguan Siou* of the KD community played an important role even though others see the KD support as "automatic" and not attributed to the *Huguan Siou* title alone (Maximus Ongkili 2007, pers. comm., 30 October). The *Huguan Siou* title is purely cultural and serves as a symbol of unity to the KD community. The title had little bearing on the politics of the KD when Stephens was in power.

⁶This claim, however, was denied by Jeffrey who said that the top PKR leadership had accepted and approved the Declaration (*Daily Express*, April 17, 2008).

But Pairin knew how important the title was to his position and that was why he tried to institutionalise it by vesting power to the KDCA to bestow the *Huguan Siou* title. The KDCA also happened to be led by Pairin who acted as president. Significantly, the KDCA took the drastic way to include all the 40 major ethnic groups in Sabah into one ethnic label known as “KD” so as increase the numerical strengths of the KD people (*Daily Express*, January 14, 1989).

It would appear that Pairin’s position as *Huguan Siou* would outlast his position as PBS president and that no one else could replace him because the *Huguan Siou* title was given to Pairin for his struggles, personality and characters (Yong Teck Lee 2007, pers. comm., 28 June). This puts Pairin in a unique position as there are no political leaders in Malaysia who hold an influential traditional title and lead a cultural body like him.

Conclusion

As we have seen from the analysis above, there are three main factors which explain why the KD voters voted for the BN and why they had abandoned the opposition:

Lack of strong issues propounded by opposition local-based parties: generally the KD voters are parochial and that they prefer a local party to represent them. The KD had no choice but to back PBS and UPKO as they are the only prominent local parties that have played the role as the eyes and ears for the KD community. Other local parties such as BERSEKUTU and PASOK are generally ineffective as they lack influential leaders and weak party structure. The lack of local issues and the unsystematic manners through which they were being disseminated by local opposition parties might also turn away KD voters.

Non-committal attitude shown by the opposition: even though the opposition led by PKR promised to return state rights back to Sabahans, the voters were not convinced of its sincerity. First, they saw the PKR as just another “parti semenanjung” (peninsular party) wanting to control the political fortune of the KD people. Anwar, for example, was seen as a former UMNO leader who was instrumental in toppling down the PBS government in 1994 while Jeffrey was seen as no more than a political opportunist wanting to make a political comeback⁷.

The failure of the Tambunan Declaration was contributed by the non-committal attitude shown by PKR leadership which is more likely to impose a direct federal control rather than surrendering certain autonomy to Sabah (Kanul Gindol 2008, pers. comm., June 25). Certainly for the KD voters, they had nothing to lose in re-electing the BN as they saw the party as being capable of bringing much development to the state. The message of development that the BN was conveying seemed attractive to some, coupled with the old tactic of giving on-the-spot grants.

Lack of strong opposition pact: the opposition’s failure to form a formidable force also contributed to the BN’s victory (Welsh 2008a and *The Star*, March 10, 2008). From the analysis, the opposition would have denied BN a huge majority in a number of KD areas and would have won at least one seat in Bingkor. Even though it would be impossible for the opposition in the form of PKR-DAP-PAS alliance to form a government in Sabah, at

⁷ Based on a random interview conducted by the authors and the readers’ feedback published in major local newspapers.

least, they could deny the BN a major victory had they chosen not to contest against each other in certain “opposition-prone” areas. Just before polling, their “marriage of convenience” had turned sour as a result of their squabble over seat allocation. Anwar’s presence to ease the tension and to broker a deal proved to be futile when the issue remained unresolved until polling day (*The Borneo Post*, February 26, 2008).

Role of PBS, the KDCA and Huguan Siou institution: since joining the BN in 2002, the PBS has ensured that the coalition party has the strong support of the KD people. This is because the KD support of PBS is significantly tied to Pairin’s dual role as *Huguan Siou* and president of the influential KDCA. The KD see no other political parties as capable of bringing their voices to the mainstream political development. Even though Jeffrey tried to assume the role through PKR, he failed because PKR is not a local party that understands the struggles of the KD people.

Another KD party which strongly uses the ethnic KD sentiment is UPKO. But unlike PBS, UPKO’s grassroots support is marginally weaker. But it is possible for UPKO to take over from PBS as it is seriously now launching an aggressive campaign to recruit more KD members, the latest being the launching of *Komulakan* (junior youth wing). Another KD based party PBRS exists because of Joseph Kurup, who is battling to survive politically. In the electoral term, the PBRS remains a “mosquito party” and its appeal among the KD is generally lower.

The PBS is still a force to be reckoned with in BN for its contribution in giving the coalition party’s the KD votes is quite significant vis-à-vis other state BN KD parties. The KD in turn consistently give their votes to PBS simply because of Pairin’s role as *Huguan Siou* and president of the influential KDCA. The KD see no other state KD parties that could replace the PBS just yet and their support of the party will remain strong in the years to come. The UPKO is slowly making inroads and its strong KD appeal has attracted the young and professional KD. Having said all this, the opposition presence in KD areas cannot be underestimated because some KD have begun to look beyond PBS in the post Mahathir era.

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