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Sabah Elections 2020: Sentiments Trending on Social Media

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- On 26 September, the East Malaysian state of Sabah heads to the polls. The state election was called following the defection of 13 assemblymen from the Warisan-led state government.
- The competition is fierce, with 447 candidates from many parties contesting for the 73 state legislative assembly seats. The main battle is however being fought between Warisan Plus on one hand and Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) on the other. Warisan Plus consists of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition and the Sabah-based Warisan, while GRS consists of Perikatan Nasional (PN), Barisan Nasional (BN), and Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS).
- The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed much of the political campaigns and discussions to online media platforms. Our research indicates that a vigorous online discourse has emerged in Sabah, particularly since the dissolution of the state assembly on 30 July.
- Three key themes can be seen in the online media discourse among Sabahans: wariness against the role of “Cybertroopers”, cynicism over party-hopping, and a deepening political divide between Sabah and Peninsular Malaysia.
- Both the incumbent (Warisan) and major opposition (BN) parties have been viciously attacked. The Warisan is painted as a pro-migrant party with poor administrative ability shown during their short tenure, while the BN parties are tagged as “robbers of the state” who failed to develop Sabah despite having exploited its natural resources for decades.

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INTRODUCTION

The East Malaysian state of Sabah, located on the island of Borneo, is scheduled to hold a snap election on September 26. This turn of events came about when the Sabah Heritage Party (Warisan) lost its majority in the state assembly following the defection of 13 state assembly members to the opposition Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition on July 30.¹ Malaysia's Westminster system does not prohibit elected representatives, whether State Assemblypersons or Members of Parliament, from switching their party allegiances while retaining their seat. Prior to the defections on July 30, Warisan and its Pakatan Harapan (PH) allies controlled 47 of the 65 seats in the state assembly.² Shafie Apdal, Sabah Chief Minister and Warisan President, immediately sought, with success, permission from the Yang Di-Pertua Negeri (Governor) to dissolve the state assembly to pave way for fresh elections. Historically, Sabah has had numerous incidences of state assemblypersons changing political allegiances and causing the collapse of the state government. This switching of allegiances is referred to as "frogging".³

This political crisis came hot on the heels of a change in the federal government in February this year. The PH-led federal government collapsed when the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (Bersatu) and a faction of the People's Justice Party (PKR) withdrew from the coalition. The present Perikatan Nasional (PN) federal government comprises of Bersatu, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and a few East Malaysian parties. In the upcoming Sabah state election, therefore the relatively new PN federal government is seeking to score a victory to bolster its legitimacy.

In this election, we have on one side Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS), which consists of PN, Barisan Nasional (BN) and Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS). The main player within PN and BN are Bersatu and UMNO respectively, with both parties having alliances with Sabah-based parties. On the other side, we have Warisan Plus, an alliance between Warisan, United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation (UPKO), and Pakatan Harapan.

Apart from GRS and Warisan Plus, non-aligned parties (e.g. Love Sabah Party) are also in the fray, in addition to 51 independent candidates. All in all, a record 447 candidates are vying for a seat in the 73-member state legislative assembly.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the mode of election campaigns. Safe distancing requirements have curtailed physical rallies and walkabouts, and online platforms have proliferated. In particular, since the dissolution of the Sabah state assembly on 30 July, a vibrant and vigorous online discourse has emerged.

Malaysia's online political space is mired in complexity due to the presence of cybertroopers. These are special operatives who act on behalf of political parties to infiltrate online discussion spaces to manipulate public opinion.⁴ This article identifies key sentiments and concerns trending on social media platforms among Sabahans in the lead-up to polling day on September 26. Its secondary objective is to examine the impact of cybertroopers on online political discourse.

The findings for this paper are based on social media analysis conducted from early August (shortly after the dissolution of the Sabah state assembly) until mid-September (midway through the election campaigning period). They provide a snapshot of views and comments from public Sabah online media spaces. The commenters are predominantly Sabahans (both living in-state and out) with a strong interest in the welfare of Sabah. These sentiments were extracted from over twenty Sabah-focused Facebook Groups and Pages such as *Suara Anak*

Sabah, *Daily Express Sabah*, and *Sayang Sabah*. They feature vibrant and vigorous debates across the political divide.

Popular discussion threads in Sabah Facebook groups can yield hundreds of comments as anything related to Sabah is seen cynically as some form of political communication meant to benefit or denigrate various Sabah-based entities. After a month of monitoring, our study identified three overarching themes, namely: strong cybertrooper awareness, frogging-induced cynicism, and a deepening of the political divide between Sabah and West Malaysia.

PARTY RHETORIC IN THE ONLINE SPACE

In the lead-up to nomination day, discussions about Warisan Plus and GRS revolved around partisanship and involved much political mudslinging. Other parties were also discussed but not as pervasive. The rhetoric against Warisan Plus was that it is a “migrant” party in reference to its earlier proposal to introduce a new way of documenting undocumented migrants in Sabah, called the Sabah Temporary Pass.⁵ Their opponents suggested that this was a veiled attempt at legalizing migrants and providing them with a pathway to becoming full citizens.⁶ When combined with the party’s strong affiliation to Sabah East Coast indigenous groups (which are closely related to Filipino indigenous groups), this was seen as an attempt to alter Sabah’s precarious demographics.⁷ This was claimed to be the reason why Warisan suffered an embarrassing loss during the Kimanis by-election held earlier this year.

Where the GRS was concerned, most discussions highlighted the failures and the poor governance of the BN when it ruled Sabah for decades until the 2018 General Election (GE2018), and with Musa Aman as the Chief Minister from 2003 to 2018. Musa was charged with corruption soon after GE2018 but was recently acquitted. The most common phrase applied to BN is “robbers of the state” which references the poor economic state Sabah is in after decades of “plundering” of their natural resources by the BN coalition. This serves as the basis for growing anti-Peninsular/Malaya sentiments in many online spaces.⁸ Within BN, UMNO is the dominant player while Bersatu is the main player for PN Sabah. UMNO and Bersatu are both Peninsular-based ethnic parties.

After nomination day on September 12, activity in these spaces became more intense, with dozens of posts going up within a single hour. The content is often live streaming of political rallies and speeches together with campaigning images on the ground. While the rhetoric against BN sought to reinforce the “robbers” narrative and to reject Peninsular-based parties, Warisan Plus was instead criticised for the weak governance and the slow economic growth Sabah experienced during Warisan’s short tenure.

CYBERTROOPER AWARENESS

One of the main problems when monitoring social media spaces in Malaysia is that it is virtually impossible to verify if an online profile is a cybertrooper or not. Cybertroopers have been operating in Malaysia for more than a decade and have perfected the art of shifting and distorting discussions without being exposed.⁹ Evidence suggests that already during the 2013 General Election, both BN and PH had “paid people to further their cause on social media.”¹⁰

While cybertroopers themselves often hide their allegiances online, their general presence is an open secret. This has had a chilling effect for online discourse, and people often tend to assume negative or conflicting views to be the work of cybertroopers. This further strengthens personal echo chambers.

The Sabah online space is not spared the presence of cybertroopers, and Sabah politicians openly accuse each other of employing cybertroopers to conduct smear campaigns against their opponents.¹¹ However, the impact of cybertroopers in Sabah is not nearly as strong as in West Malaysia. Debates remain vibrant, and Sabah commenters openly discuss political issues in non-partisan digital spaces. Dissenting posts are not immediately dismissed as cybertrooper fodder, and commenters instead willingly engage with them.

Most cybertrooper activities in Sabah spaces are quite predictable, and easy to spot. They often come in two forms: as someone constantly posting or sharing posts that support a certain political position and never replying to comments; and someone who only posts comments and replies, often engaging in heated debates as they aggressively defend their positions. This makes it easy for them to be spotted, which results in commenters making fun of their feeble and obvious attempts to troll.

The lingua franca in Sabah online spaces is Bahasa Sabah, a local dialect of Bahasa Malaysia which most native Sabahans understand. As a dialect, it is characterised by unique spellings reflect differences in pronunciation, in phrasing and in sentence structure. This is reflected in how it is written online. West Malaysian cybertroopers masquerading as Sabahans (using Sabah-styled names for their profile) quickly reveal themselves once they get into heated debates. Their lack of proficiency in Bahasa Sabah becomes evident.

Despite this, we do not discount the possibility that there are experienced or capable cybertroopers who are able to operate and influence discussions without raising suspicions. The presence of these obvious cybertroopers could be seen as a diversionary tactic that will lull Sabahans into a false sense of security; if they can identify cybertroopers easily, commenters will let their guard down and not use a critical eye on more devious cybertroopers. Regardless, this has the positive effect of making Sabahans feel comfortable to engage in balanced debate rather than cynically assume opposing points as cybertrooper work.

FROGGING-INDUCED CYNICISM

The term “frogging” may have been coined in Sabah due to the very flippant nature in which its politicians “hop” from one political party to another. It is often suggested that any guilt involved is assuaged by financial benefits. Be that as it may, the act of switching parties was an infrequent occurrence until PH took over the federal government in 2018.

Throughout our monitoring, we note that many Sabah commenters express great cynicism and skepticism to any form of political messaging, claim and campaign promise. Since any politician or even political party can change allegiance at will, elections appear purely ceremonial, and the final winners are determined through processes outside of voters’ control.

Frogging does dog politicians who have engaged in it though; many commenters regularly remind people of how specific politicians and parties have changed allegiances in the past and how anything they promise is merely temporary. Political parties that have remained

firm and never wavered are viewed positively. Since GE2018, political allegiances have been especially fluid as both Warisan and PN have gained and lost from frogging, but PN's association with frogging is far stronger due to its role in the collapse of both the PH and the Sabah governments. This puts PN at a disadvantage as they will have trouble shaking the frog label compared to Warisan who will leverage this for their campaign.

A DEEPENING DIVIDE BETWEEN WEST MALAYSIA AND SABAH

The strongest sentiment of all, seemingly bipartisan in nature, is probably the growing resentment over Sabah's current position within the Malaysian Federation. United under the clarion call of "Sabah for Sabahans", many threads include calls for Sabah to be more self-governing and to be less subservient to Putrajaya. This desire is translated into a call for people to support parties that can deliver a solid promise and that wish to break the hegemony of the federal government.

Much of Sabahans' resentment is aimed at BN and UMNO for enslaving their beloved state. Any point raised about Sabah lacking infrastructure, economic well-being or political stability, is often linked to interference and intervention from across the South China Sea.

While BN is seen as the source of the exploitation of Sabah, Warisan Plus does not necessarily benefit from this rhetoric. Many have pointed to Warisan's failed promises from their GE14 campaign which included seeking to return more power to Sabah from the federal government. Even so, Warisan's strong ties and affiliations with Peninsular-based parties such as the Democratic Action Party (DAP), the People's Justice Party (PKR) and the National Trust Party (Amanah), have also been used to indicate that they are no better than BN and are still subservient to external powers. Be that as it may, Warisan is still highly regarded as a Sabah based party that is dictating its alliance with its West Malaysian allies as opposed to other Sabah parties in PN which are seen as extensions of federal rule.

Several events that occurred in the last month in West Malaysia have further fueled this sentiment, namely the unwarranted and unjustified attacks by a federal deputy minister against a young Sabahan university student¹² regarding internet connectivity, and a PAS Member of Parliament from Kelantan issuing insulting remarks against Christianity.¹³ The former case is seen as yet another blatant attempt by Peninsular politicians, one in a long line, to denigrate and reject Sabahan concerns. Gaps in basic infrastructure are seen as evidence of the federal government failing in its duties towards Sabah, and to see a federal deputy minister dismissing a young Sabahan's allegations about inferior infrastructure in the state rubs Sabahans the wrong way.

Concerning the insult to Christians, Sabahans have used it as the perfect example of the unwanted encroachment into Sabah of Peninsular-style politics, which is often about stirring up racial and religious issues. A substantial proportion of Sabahans subscribe to the Christian faith, and commenters constantly highlight that racial and religious differences typically are not salient issues in Sabah, with most Sabahans perceiving themselves to be far more tolerant and multicultural by nature than are their Peninsular counterparts.

This anti-Peninsular sentiment came to a head after nomination day as posts featuring UMNO politicians arriving in Sabah, with their campaign messages starting to flood Facebook groups. While there were commenters who welcomed their arrival, many others voiced their disdain at the thought of further federal interference. Welcoming these "robbers" was seen as welcoming them to continue exploitation of their beloved state.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this paper highlight the Sabah election zeitgeist. The ultimate winners will probably be candidates who are best able to address the abovementioned sentiments. Hopelessness and cynicism serve as the foundation for Sabahans to yearn for changes that can strengthen the state and give them more agency within the federation.

Most of the big players in Malaysian politics are from the older generation, and at present, there is a strong push by young voters to change the political landscape, also in Sabah. A few days before nomination day, a large group of young Sabahan artists released “Sabah Bangkit” (Rise, Sabah), a music video meant to represent the hopes and dreams of Sabah youths in the upcoming elections. The video highlights the strong sense of unity that Sabahans supposedly have for each other and for their state, and has generated a lot of buzz amongst young Sabahans who see it as a call to action to reject frogging politics and to focus on strengthening Sabah from within.

¹ Arnold Puyok. “Political Turmoil in Sabah: Attacks of the Katakas”. *ISEAS Commentary* no. 113 (5 August 2020).

² Kevin Zhang and Lee Poh Onn. “The Collapse of the State Government in Sabah”. *ISEAS Commentary* no. 1099 (4 August 2020).

³ James Chin. “Going East: UMNO’s Entry in Sabah Politics.” *Asian Journal of Political Science* 7, no. 1 (1999), 32.

⁴ Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard. “The Global Disinformation Disorder: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation.” Working Paper 2 (2019). Oxford: Project on Computational Propaganda.

⁵ See, for instance, The Star. “Hisham: PSS will lead to bigger security issues”. 12 January 2020 <<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/01/12/hisham-pss-will-lead-to-bigger-security-issues>> (last accessed 19 September 2020); Malaysiakini. “Upko battles to shake off Warisan’s migrant bogeyman in KDM heartland”. 19 September 2020 <<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/543221>> (last accessed 19 September 2020).

⁶ Channel News Asia. “As Sabah heads to polls on Sep 26, what’s at stake for the main political blocs?”. 15 September 2020 <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/malaysia-sabah-state-election-sep-26-political-blocs-13109180>> (last accessed 19 September 2020).

⁷ Lee Poh Onn and Kevin Zhang. “The Kimanis By-election: A Much-needed Sweet (Manis) Victory for Warisan.” *ISEAS Perspective* no. 3 (16 January 2020), p. 6. (citation for Project IC)

⁸ Prior to the formation of Malaysia, the peninsular of Malaysia or West Malaysia was known as the country of Malaya

⁹ Julian Hopkins. “Cybertroopers and tea parties: government use of the Internet in Malaysia.” *Asian Journal of Communication* 24, no. 1 (2014), 12-13.

¹⁰ Ross Tapsell. “Negotiating Media ‘Balance’ in Malaysia’s 2013 General Election.” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 32, no 2 (2013), 47.

¹¹ Borneo Today. “BN wasted funds, did nothing, opposition cyber troopers told.” 6 February 2019 <<https://www.borneotoday.net/bn-wasted-funds-did-nothing-opposition-cyber-troopers-told/>> (last accessed 19 September 2020).

¹² University student and budding Youtuber Veveonah Mosibin gained fame earlier in the year when she livestreamed herself taking a university exam while sitting on a tree overnight due to poor Internet infrastructure in rural Sabah. *Zahidi Zainul* Abidin, deputy minister of media and communications, criticized her and called it a publicity stunt and that there were no exams taking place at the time. Many Sabahans have rallied behind Veveonah, who had since presented proof that she was not lying.

¹³ Nik Muhammad Zawawi Salleh, Member of Parliament from Pasir Puteh, alleged during a parliamentary debate that the Bible was “perverted” or “corrupted.” The Malay Mail. “Sabah leaders sue PAS MP over insensitive Bible remark”. 4 September 2020 <<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/09/04/sabah-leaders-sue-pas-mp-over-insensitive-bible-remark/1900181>> (last accessed 19 September 2020).

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