

PERSPECTIVE

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The Sabah State Election: A Narrow Win and Precarious Mandate for the New Government

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- On 30 July 2020, the Sabah state assembly was dissolved by the Chief Minister Shafie Apdal, to nullify a coup against his administration by his predecessor Musa Aman.
- Held on 26 September, the election involved a total of 447 candidates, including 56 independents, vying for 73 state seats. The main contest was between the Warisan-Plus coalition headed by Shafie Apdal, and the newly formed federal government-backed umbrella of coalition parties called Gabungan Rakyat Sabah.
- Unlike previous state elections, the campaign was a low-key affair due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Chief Minister Shafie Apdal asked Sabahans to unite against a perceived West Malaysian domination of Sabah politics.
- Gabungan Rakyat Sabah emphasized the failure of Warisan-Plus over the past 26 months to bring meaningful development to the state, and highlighted the need to have close cooperation with Putrajaya.
- Gabungan Rakyat Sabah obtained a simple majority by securing 38 out of 73 state assembly seats. Warisan Plus won 32, and 3 state seats went to independent candidates. In terms of the popular vote, Warisan Plus had a slight edge over Gabungan Rakyat Sabah in winning 43.42%, or 317,541 votes.
- This election failed to deliver a stable state government for Sabah. There is a possibility of infighting within the fragile ruling coalition of Gabungan Rakyat Sabah.

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INTRODUCTION

The Sabah state election—held on 26 September 2020 — resulted from a coup attempt led by the former Chief Minister Musa Aman and supported by defectors from the ruling Warisan Plus party.

Shafie Apdal, the incumbent Chief Minister, acted swiftly to nullify the coup by gaining consent from the Governor to dissolve the state assembly on 30 July 2020. Nearly a dozen political parties contested in the election, but the main struggle was between the incumbent state government, Warisan Plus, and the opposition grand coalition called Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS). The former is a coalition of Warisan, Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Amanah (Amanah), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation (UPKO). The latter is an umbrella of three main coalitions of Barisan Nasional (BN), Perikatan Nasional (PN), and Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) created by the Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin.

Other smaller local parties including independent candidates led to multi-corner contests that made this state election unpredictable. In fact, it was one of the most closely contested and polarised in Sabah history.

One week into the campaigning, fieldwork observation from West and East Coast of Sabah highlighted that Warisan Plus and GRS were neck-to-neck in vying for voters. Shafie Apdal managed to attract people wherever he campaigned, especially in the East Coast of Sabah. GRS' campaign was marked by its inability to settle on a clear Chief Minister candidate, as well as the failure to solve competition between coalition partners. However, frequent campaign visits by the Prime Minister promising funds for development, and Warisan Plus' failure to convince non-Muslim Bumiputra on the issue of illegal immigrants, gave GRS a slight advantage over Warisan Plus. A lower turnout, due to the Covid-19 health concerns and travel restrictions on largely Warisan-leaning Sabah voters working outside the state, further enhanced GRS' edge.

On 26 September, 66.28% (745,387) of registered voters cast ballots for 73 state assembly seats.¹ GRS won 38 seats, one more than the threshold for a majority, while Warisan Plus secured 32 seats, and 3 were won by independents. In terms of the popular vote, Warisan Plus edged ahead of GRS by obtaining 43.42% or (317,541 votes) compared to GRS's 43.22% (316,049 votes).² GRS' strong performance in West Coast Muslim-Bumiputra seats and interior non-Muslim Bumiputra constituencies, as well as the low voter-turnout, contributed to its victory.

This Perspective provides an overview of the election, including candidates and decisive campaign issues. Drawing on various sources, fieldwork and personal observations in the West and East Coast of Sabah during the first week of the campaign period, it also discusses the result and investigates Sabah's political stability.

BACKGROUND

The infamous ‘Sheraton Move’ in February 2020 not only triggered the fall of the federal Pakatan Harapan administration but also spurred political realignments in many states. Johor, Melaka, Perak, and Kedah, which were once ruled by Pakatan Harapan, shifted to the newly created Perikatan Nasional—a loose coalition consisting of Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU), Barisan Nasional (BN), and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS).

In East Malaysia, with Gabungan Parti Sarawak firmly behind the formation of PN, Parti Warisan Sabah was a natural choice to join a broader PN alliance. Moreover, PN, with a razor thin majority in the federal parliament, fervently courted the eight Warisan MPs. Frequent calls were made by the PN leadership to persuade Shafie Apdal to join Perikatan Nasional, including offering him the Deputy Prime Minister’s post.³

However, Shafie Apdal was firm in his decision to support former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and Pakatan Harapan’s push to retake Putrajaya. The opposition grouping even portrayed Shafie Apdal as one of its potential Prime Minister candidates. Following its unsuccessful attempts to woo him, PN shifted its focus to weakening Shafie’s Warisan-led state government.⁴

On 29 July 2020, the former Chief Minister Musa Aman declared that, with the defection of a few assemblymen from the Warisan coalition, he held majority support in the Sabah State Assembly.⁵ He further claimed that Home Minister Hamzah Zainuddin had made a courtesy call to the Sabah Governor, informing him of the creation of a new PN-friendly state administration. The next day, Shafie Apdal announced the dissolution of the Sabah state assembly, to which the Governor consented. This paved the way for the Malaysian Election Commission to fix 12 September 2020 as nomination day and 26 September 2020 for the election.

CANDIDATES AND CAMPAIGNS

The 16th Sabah State Election had the most numerous candidates and multi-cornered contests in the state’s history. In total, 447 candidates – including 56 independents – vied for 73 state assembly seats. Six-cornered fights took place in 26 state seats and two seats, Inanam and Bengkoka, saw a 10-cornered and 11-cornered fight, respectively. It is worth noting that some independent candidates openly supported the Perikatan Nasional federal administration.⁶

Just before nomination day, Barisan Nasional and Perikatan Nasional, the two major coalition parties in GRS, managed to find common ground on seat negotiation. Initially these two parties had major differences about where each party should contest. Barisan Nasional ran in 41 seats while Perikatan Nasional was allocated 29 seats. However, Parti Bersatu Sabah, another key member of GRS, failed to reach an agreement on seat allocation and at the eleventh hour decided to contest 22 seats, 17 of which clashed with other GRS members.⁷

For Warisan Plus, seat negotiation among its coalition members went smoothly and the coalition contested in all constituencies. In fact, Warisan, DAP, and Amanah contested 53 state seats under a single banner. The United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation (UPKO), another key partner in Warisan Plus, was offered 12 seats mainly in Kadazan-Dusun-Murut (KDM) areas. Shafie Apdal stood firm regarding seat negotiations with Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR); PKR's initial demand for more than 15 seats was rejected and the party was only offered 7 seats. Other parties such as Parti Cinta Sabah, headed by former Minister of Foreign Affairs Anifah Aman, contested in all 73 state seats; United Sabah National Organisation (USNO) which once ruled Sabah, contested in 53 seats. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) headed by former Chief Minister Chong Kah Kiat contested in 56 seats.⁸

The increase in state assembly seats from 60 to 73 was widely expected to favour GRS, especially UMNO. In fact, most of these newly created seats were carved out from existing UMNO strongholds. The new seats of Pantai Dalit, Darau, Tanjong Keramat, Sungai Manila, and Lamag are largely Muslim-Bumiputra dominated seats, which UMNO was expected to win. Of the new seats, BERSATU was allocated two—Bandau and Pintasan. In the new seats of Tulip and Telupid dominated by the KDM community, STAR, PBS, and UPKO were expected to contest fiercely. Only in four of the new seats (Bengkoka, Kukusan, Segama, and Limbahau) did Warisan Plus have some advantage.⁹

Unlike the election in 2018, the 2020 contest saw a rather low turnout. With strict Covid-19 measures in place, voter outreach was conducted in small groups. Large *ceramahs* were missing from this snap state election. Shafie Apdal started his election campaign in Senallang state constituency in the East Coast of Sabah. He maintained the old style of campaigning by visiting various *kampungs* and fishing communities, and asking people to vote for Warisan Plus. He prioritized the mainly Muslim-Bumiputra-dominated East Coast of Sabah, which was Warisan Plus' redoubt.¹⁰

From his home constituency, Shafie Apdal moved to help other Warisan Plus candidates in the East Coast areas of Kunak, Lahad Datu, and Tawau. From there, he proceeded to the Sandakan and Libaran parliamentary constituencies. In Sandakan's predominantly urban Chinese areas, specifically in Elopura and Tanjong Papat, Shafie was joined by federal DAP leaders to garner votes. Shafie also heavily campaigned for Warisan Plus candidates in the UMNO stronghold of Sungai Sibuga and the newly created seat of Sungai Manila, where Musa Aman was initially expected to contest.

Shafie Apdal's Warisan Plus election campaign emphasised promoting 'unity' against what the party perceived as 'the increasingly West Malaysian political domination' that could destabilise the Sabahan way of life. Warisan Plus also asked Sabahans to return Warisan to power so that the party could complete its task to develop the state. In KDM areas, Warisan Plus realised that the trust deficit among voters was very high and, in order to overcome this, recruited former Chief Justice of Malaysia, Richard Malanjun, to campaign on its behalf.¹¹

The creation of Gabungan Rakyat Sabah on the eve of nomination day gave the PN-BN-PBS affiliated opposition a last-minute show of unity. GRS failed to reach consensus on its

chief minister candidate and to solve overlapping claims on state assembly seats among coalition members. To overcome these problems, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin frequently visited Sabah during the campaign period, acted as a trouble shooter, and also personally appeared, where he repeatedly reminded Sabahans to elect a state government which can work with the federal government, and he promised more development funds if GRS were to win the election. Muhyiddin heavily campaigned for the Perikatan Nasional coalition, especially for his party BERSATU headed by potential Chief Minister candidate Hajiji Noor. GRS also received a major election campaign boost when the former chief minister Musa Aman, who was not given a seat to contest, joined in to campaign for GRS candidates.¹²

For GRS, the central election issue was Shafie Apdal's failure to bring comprehensive development to Sabah under his administration over the preceding 26 months. More specifically, GRS' election campaign focused on the lack of basic infrastructure, the failure of the Warisan state government to revive the ailing Sabah economy, as well as the need to have a close relationship with the central government in Putrajaya. In non-Muslim Bumiputra areas, besides the issue of development, PBS and STAR, the two major parties representing the KDM community in GRS alleged that the Shafie Apdal administration failed to handle the issue of illegal immigrants in the state.

In UMNO, the appointment of Bung Mokhtar as BN chairman and the refusal of the state UMNO leadership to give a seat to former Chief Minister Musa Aman created a temporary rift among UMNO supporters just before the campaign. Musa's supporters threatened to vote for opposition candidates if he was not given a seat to contest.¹³ The national party leadership managed to solve the issue just before the nomination day, and Bung was retained as UMNO Sabah Chairman.

THE RESULTS

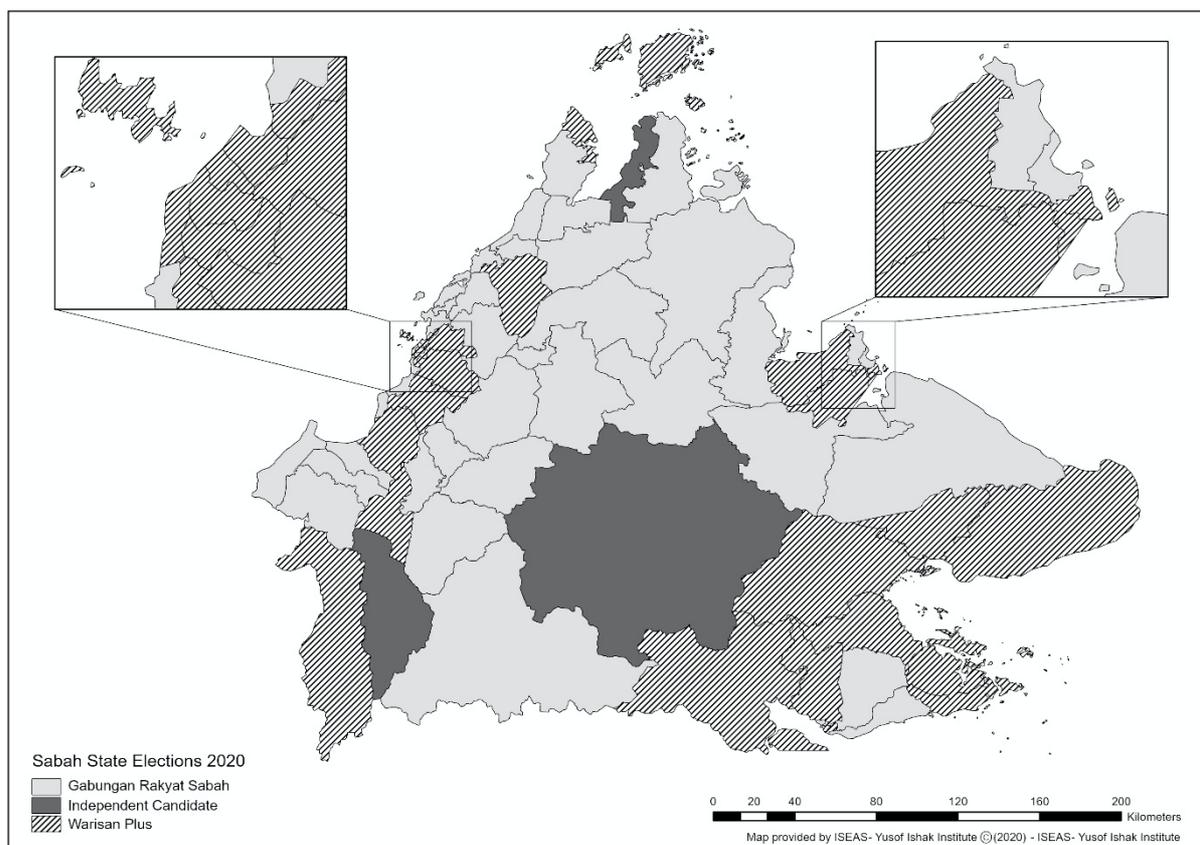
Gabungan Rakyat Sabah carried the day, winning 38 state assembly seats. Within the GRS coalition, Barisan Nasional won 14 seats, Perikatan Nasional 17, and PBS 7 state seats. Meanwhile, Warisan Plus won 32 state seats, comprised of 29 on the Warisan ticket (23 Warisan, 6 DAP), 2 for PKR and one for UPKO. Three state seats went to independent candidates (see Table 1 below).

Only 66.28% or 745,387 out of 1,124,589 million registered voters voted in this election. The low turnout had an impact on the result. Even before the election there was fear on Warisan's side that the low turnout would dampen the party's chances of retaining the state government.

Table 1: Sabah State Election: Seats Won by Parties in 2018 and 2020

2018 State Election	
Party/Coalition	Seats
Warisan-PH coalition	29
Warisan	21
DAP	6
PKR	2
BN Coalition	29
UMNO	17
PBS	6
UPKO	5*
PBRs	1*
STAR	2
<p>* The Warisan-Pakatan Harapan formed the state government in 2018 when 6 state assemblymen (5 from UPKO and 1 from PBRs) defected from BN to Warisan-Pakatan headed by Shafie Apdal.</p> <p>Source: The Star, 2018, Election Results: Sabah, https://election.thestar.com.my/sabah.html</p>	
2020 State Election	
Party/Coalition	Seats
Warisan Plus (Coalition)	32 (total)
Warisan	23
DAP	6
PKR	2
UPKO	1
GRS (Coalition)	38 (total)
UMNO	14
BERSATU	11
PBS	7
STAR	6
Independent	3 (total)
<p>Source: Dashboard, Malaysian Election Commission, 2020, <https://dashboard.spr.gov.my/#!/home></p>	

Figure One



The Muslim-Bumiputra majority seats were geographically split, with GRS being successful on the West Coast, while Warisan maintained its winning momentum on the East Coast, where it had secured a foothold in the 2018 general election. However, Warisan failed to expand its domain to West Coast Muslim-Bumiputra constituencies such as Sulaman, Pantai Dalit, and Karambunai.

All the Muslim-Bumiputra heavyweight candidates won in their respective constituencies. Shafie Apdal easily retained his Senallang state seat, with a majority of 4,631 votes against the PN candidate. Bung Mokhtar Radin, the UMNO Sabah Chairman, carried the newly created Lamag state seat with a majority of just 661 votes against his Warisan rival. In Sulaman, the BERSATU State Chairman, Hajiji Noor, won the seat with a majority of 3,099 votes defeating candidates from Warisan and Parti Cinta Sabah.¹⁴

In the new state seats, UMNO performed very well by winning 6 out of 13 seats. The party won Muslim-Bumiputra dominated seats Pantai Dalit, Tanjong Keramant, Sungai Manila, Lamag and surprisingly won the mixed seat of Bengkoka. BERSATU managed to win the new seats of Bandau and Pintasan. The KDM community-dominated new seats of Tulip and Telupid were won by STAR and PBS respectively. Warisan Plus managed to win four seats—Kukusan, Segama, Limbahau, and Darau.

GRS did remarkably well in the KDM majority areas, with some surprises, the biggest of which was the performance of Parti Solidariti Tanah Airku (STAR) headed by Jeffrey Kitingan. The party not only retained the Bingkor and Tambunan state seats, which it won in 2018, but also expanded to other areas. STAR's haul this time included the Paginatan and Liawan seats near Tambunan, and the Tulid and Sook seats where it had previously not established a presence. Its close rival PBS,¹⁵ another KDM-dominated party, also performed better than expected. It claimed seven seats, most notably, the Kiulu seat; the party's candidate there, Joniston Bangkuai, defeated UPKO President Wilfred Madius Tangau with a majority of 1,221 votes.¹⁶

In fact, UPKO, a key coalition member in Warisan Plus, recorded one of the worst performances in KDM areas. The party was reduced to one Kedamaian seat when its Vice President Ewon Benedick defeated PBS's Demis Rumanti. Other key members of the party lost to PBS and STAR candidates. PBS and STAR managed to capture many KDM seats with what can be called 'anti Shafie' sentiment in the KDM community.

In the urban Chinese majority areas, Warisan Plus coalition member DAP, performed extremely well. For the first time DAP contested under Warisan's banner and won six out of the seven seats contested. In Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan, the party defeated candidates from BN-MCA and Perikatan Nasional. DAP won with a huge majority in seats like Luyang, Likas, Elopura, and Tanjong Papat. Only in the mixed seat of Bingkor did the party lose, to STAR.

Multi-cornered fights and political personality played an important role in the three independent candidates' victory. In the mixed seat of Pitas, Ruddy Awah managed to win with a majority of 559 votes, thanks to split votes between the BN and Warisan candidates. In the non-Muslim Bumiputra-dominated seats of Kemabong and Kuamut, the candidates' past legacy played an important part in their victory. Rubin Balang who won the Kemabong seat is a veteran politician who formerly represented this constituency under PBS and UMNO from 1994 until 2013. On the other hand, Masing Banah who won the Kuamut seat, was an incumbent state assemblyman who won the seat in 2018 under BN-UPKO, joined Warisan to form the state government in 2018, but later defected to Musa Aman's camp in the failed political coup.

WHAT NEXT? CAN GRS PROVIDE STABILITY?

The survival of the GRS government in Sabah depends on how UMNO and BERSATU – the biggest coalition members – can compromise and work as a team. It is still too early to judge GRS' performance but from the first day cracks appeared within the coalition, when Bung Mokhtar Radin – UMNO's chief minister candidate – was sidelined, while BERSATU state leader, Hajiji Noor, was chosen as the Chief Minister.

Among GRS' parties, UMNO holds the most seats, i.e. 14, with BERSATU a close second – although some argued that Hajiji as leader of PN is backed by PN's combined seat count of 17. Ultimately, the Prime Minister's wishes prevailed. There was fear in the UMNO

leadership that the compromise for the chief minister's post may prove too much, and more importantly, that it would give a wrong signal to UMNO supporters to shift their loyalty to other parties representing the interests of Muslim-Bumiputra community.¹⁷ In an attempt to appease UMNO, Bung Mokhtar Radin was made Deputy Chief Minister and given the Works portfolio. Beside this, three UMNO leaders were made full cabinet ministers.¹⁸

A closer look at the working relationship among the parties in the GRS coalition shows that the political survival and a common enemy—Shafie Apdal—had been the binding force. With the defeat of Warisan Plus, GRS needs to consider what they have which can hold the coalition together to govern a state where the electorate is evenly divided between support for GRS and Warisan Plus. Defending Sabah-centric policies and the state's multi-ethnic/religious landscape will need to be GRS' top priority. More importantly, the GRS coalition needs to demonstrate that they have the autonomy to make decisions on issues related to Sabah rather than depend on 'instructions' from the national leadership.

For instance, the recent appointment of a PAS member as one of the appointed assemblymen in the state parliament raised eyebrows among the KDM community about Putrajaya's interference. This PAS member's appointment is largely believed to have been decided by Putrajaya without a proper discussion with GRS coalition members such as PBS and STAR. In fact, just a few months ago, PAS's Pasir Puteh MP's remark questioning the Bible went down badly with the Non-Muslim Bumiputra community in Sabah who are largely Christians. PBS and STAR, after getting a fresh mandate from the KDM community, will be under scrutiny for this appointment.¹⁹

With a fragile GRS coalition as the state government, there is a possibility that Sabah will once again face political turmoil. Shafie Apdal's Warisan is still the single largest party in the Sabah state assembly and will be closely watching the development of intra-alliance politics not only in GRS but also in Putrajaya.

CONCLUSION

Gabungan Rakyat Sabah's victory temporarily secures and strengthens Muhyiddin Yassin's position as the Prime Minister. With the appointment of Sabah BERSATU chairman Hajiji Noor as Chief Minister, Muhyiddin has exerted control over GRS, but tensions with UMNO are persistent and will require continuous negotiation. UPKO's disastrous performance and Warisan's failure to expand its influence in the West Coast of Sabah negated Warisan Plus' attempt to recapture power.

On the whole, this snap state election failed to deliver a strong and stable state government for Sabah. There are already clear signs, ranging from the appointment of chief minister to the key ministerial posts, that UMNO and BERSATU rivalry in GRS will continue to dominate the state, while Warisan holds the numbers to provide a robust opposition.

- ¹ ‘2020 Sabah State Election: The results’, *Daily Express Sabah*, 27 September 2020, pp. 4-5.
- ² Dashboard, Malaysian Election Commission < <https://dashboard.spr.gov.my/#!/home> > (accessed 29 October 2020).
- ³ Azril Anuar, “PM Denies Offering Shafie Deputy Prime Minister Post”, *Malay Mail*, 17 July 2020, < <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/07/17/pm-denies-offering-shafie-deputy-prime-minister-post/1885469> > , (accessed on 27 September 2020).
- ⁴ Rumours had been swirling that there could be possible defections from Warisan coalition which called for the creation of a PN-friendly state government in Sabah. It was reported that ‘agents’ were approaching Warisan state assemblymen asking them to defect by offering money and positions. Durie Ruine Fond, “We’re being offered money, positions to defect, claim Sabah DAP Reps”, *Malay Mail*, 22 July 2020, < <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/07/22/were-being-offered-money-positions-to-defect-claim-sabah-dap-reps/> > (accessed 27 September 2020).
- ⁵ In an attempt to stop the state election, former chief minister Musa Aman initiated court proceedings against the dissolution of state assembly by Shafie Apdal. On 8 September 2020, the Court of Appeal dismissed Musa Aman’s appeal against the state assembly dissolution. The court of Appeal judges unanimously agreed that the Head of State (Yang DiPertua Negeri) had correctly exercised his discretion within the provisions of the Sabah Constitution to dissolve the Sabah state assembly on 30 July 2020.
- ⁶ “Sabah polls: 11-corner, 10 corner flights for two seats”, *Malaysiakini.com*, 12 September 2020, < <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/542384> > (accessed on 27 September 2020).
- ⁷ Durie Rainer Fong, “Clashes in More Seats Among Opposition Parties After PBS Springs Surprises”, *Free Malaysia Today*, 12 September 2020, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/09/12/clashes-in-more-seats-among-opposition-parties-after-pbs-springs-surprise/>, (accessed 28 September 2020).
- ⁸ “Sabah Election: PKR to Contest Seven Seats”, *NST Online*, 11 September 2020, < <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2020/09/623721/sabah-election-pkr-contest-seven-seats> > (accessed on 26 September 2020).
- ⁹ Bridget Welsh, “Sabah’s New Seat: A Reassessment”, *Malaysiakini.com*, 9 September 2020, < <https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/541922> >, (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- ¹⁰ Fieldwork observations are from the East Coast of Sabah.
- ¹¹ Julia Chan, “Former Chief Justice Richard Melanjun Backs Warisan Government in Sabah Polls”, *Malay Mail*, 13 September 2020, < <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/09/13/former-chief-justice-richard-malanjun-backs-warisan-govt-in-sabah-polls/1902881> >, (accessed 26 September 2020).
- ¹² “Change For Better”, *Daily Express Sabah*, 18 September 2020, p. 1.
- ¹³ Jerry Choong, ‘UMNO’s Sabah Candidate Faces Rejection as 20 Over branch Chief’s Back Musa Aman, *Malay Mail*, 11 September 2020, < <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/09/11/umnos-sabah-candidate-faces-rejection-as-20-over-branch-chiefs-back-musa-am/1902305> > (accessed on 30 October 2020).
- ¹⁴ ‘2020 Sabah State Election: The results’, *Daily Express Sabah*, 27 September 2020, pp. 4-5.
- ¹⁵ PBS ruled Sabah from 1985 to 1994. It views STAR and UPKO as a threat to KDM community’s unity in Sabah politics. In fact, the highly respected ‘Huguan Siou’ (paramount leader) title within the KDM people is still with former PBS chief minister Pairin Kitingan.

¹⁶ ‘2020 Sabah State Election: The results’, *Daily Express Sabah*, 27 September 2020, pp. 4-5.

¹⁷ 2020 Sabah State Election: The results’, *Daily Express Sabah*, 27 September 2020, pp. 4-5.

¹⁸ The new Sabah cabinet lineup. The Chief Minister Hajiji Noor (BERSATU), Deputy chief Minister Bung Mokhtar Radin (UMNO), Deputy Chief Minister II, Jeffrey Kitingan (STAR) and Deputy Chief Minister III, Joachin Gunsalam from (PBS). See more at (<http://sabah.gov.my/cms/?q=ms/structure/tab5>) accessed on 30 October 2020.

¹⁹ “Sabah PAS Secretary Appointed as Assemblyperson”, *Malaysiakini.com*, 8 October 2020,

<<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/545704>>, (accessed on 8 October 2020).

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