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Sabah from the Ground

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Sabah from the Ground

The 2020 Elections and the Politics of Survival

Bridget Welsh, Vilashini Somiah and Benjamin YH Loh
(editors)



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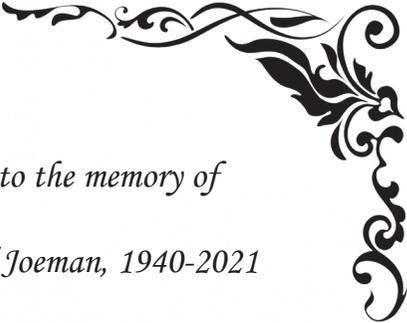
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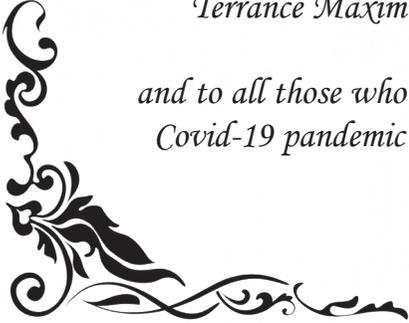
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This book is dedicated to the memory of
Datuk Thasius Sipanggol Joeman, 1940-2021

Terrance Maximus Tangit, 1967-2021



and to all those who lost their lives during the
Covid-19 pandemic in Sabah and Malaysia.

A Defining Role for a New Malaysia Forgone?

There has never been so much written on and researched about an election in Sabah. The chapters of this book deal with the many issues that have bedeviled Sabah politics from the time of its entry into Malaysia. The former Warisan Plus government infused the campaign with a style reminiscent of the freshness that the late Adenan Satem brought into Sarawak's politics. It also rekindled hopes of a 'second coming' for the New Malaysia touted by Pakatan Harapan during the 2018 General Election, and its short time in government. The chapters are a good read on the dynamics of Sabah politics and provide pointers, perhaps, on why the new dawn of Sabah politics may not yet see the light of day any time soon!

Illegal immigration, which has been billed as the mother of all problems in Sabah during previous elections, reared its ugly head in Sabah politics soon after the declaration of independence and the formation of Malaysia. Robust politicking especially involving the Muslim and non-Muslim Bumiputeras generated policies which changed the demography of the state. Clandestinely implemented by officials either at the behest of the government, or at least its acquiescence, these moves have been, uncharacteristically for a government policy initiative, a roaring success.

The numerous elections held for both Parliament and the state assembly have failed to produce any fixed solution to the immigration issue. A Royal Commission of Inquiry was set up to look into this but until today nothing of significance has been undertaken to address the issue. It calls for sincerity and seriousness on the part of the governments and pragmatism from amongst Sabahans adversely affected by the influx of illegal immigrants, many of whom have now secured citizenship through dubious means.

Perhaps a Truth and Reconciliation Commission can be considered to facilitate a national healing and a lasting solution. The government and

perpetrators of a redefined Sabah demography can own up to their actions. Sabah can accept its fair share of the immigrants with the rest distributed between the other states. As an assurance of its commitment to racial and religious harmony, the state government can take steps to return to the constitutional provisions as of Malaysia Day 1963. Sabah then did not have an official religion. With the immigration issue out of the way, the state can then focus on strengthening its economy and the eradication of poverty.

The strong presence of Kuala Lumpur has continued to exert its influence on the outcome of elections in Sabah, as well as on the composition of the ensuing government. The fight for power at the centre has spilled over to the states and it does appear that this will be a feature of Malaysian politics for some time to come. Sadly, this will divert the attention of winning parties away from the business of providing good governance – as the eyes of the victorious will be trained towards another victory in the next battle. For Sabah, the overdependence of state leaders on political support from Kuala Lumpur will compromise the pursuit of states' rights, which were a very significant part of the election campaign.

The perennial issues of Sabah politics are thriving. The same issues will flow seamlessly into the elections ahead. What is interesting to note is that the natives of Malaysia from the third largest island in the world are articulating issues openly. In the past, the loud voices in the debate were from the non-Muslim communities but today the Muslim Bumiputera are also at the forefront demanding state rights and articulating the need to steer the country towards building a nation for all Malaysians. Perhaps herein lie the pointers for the search of the lost soul of the nation. Can Malaysian Borneo rise to the occasion? Doesn't the Sun rise from the East!

Bernard Giluk Dompok

Chief Minister of Sabah 1998-1999

Learning from Sabah

It is my pleasure to accept this invitation to write a foreword for *Sabah from the Ground*. My identity and roots will always be tied to my place of birth, my beloved land of great beauty and individuality. This book offers a variety of perspectives focused on contemporary Sabah politics from academicians, journalists and activists. It is good to see more scholarly attention on Sabah, especially from young Sabahan scholars in the collection.

From my perspective, Sabah politics offers important lessons for the rest of Malaysia.

Generally, political development in Sabah is more mature than that in the Semenanjung (Peninsula). In the 14th General Election in 2018 and the 16th Sabah state election in 2020, we saw peaceful transitions from one administration to another despite fiery campaign periods, and without recourse to protracted post-election crises. Politicians have put aside their differences to come together and work for the people of the state. Sabah has had five peaceful transitions of power, and while some of these have faced challenges, there has been a willingness to accept the role of the opposition and new governments throughout. Sabahans have embraced political change, long before the Semenanjung. When Sabahans have been unsatisfied, they have voted out governments. We are more evolved as voters because of our willingness to accept different political leadership.

And although Sabahans tend to be passionate about the parties they support (or don't), we have developed a reputation for being a very united people. This is because Sabah practices a politics of accommodation; racial and religious identities are celebrated differently in Sabah from the Semenanjung. Sabahans recognise that their differences are to be embraced not effaced. We appreciate our diversity and know that our diversity is a strength. We listen to each other – a theme in Dr Benjamin YH Loh and Yi Jian Ho's chapter on Sabah's digital space. The Semenanjung has a lot to learn from Sabah's greater ethnic tolerance and inclusion.

This is not to say that we do not have problems associated with race and religion, which will happen given the prominence of racial politics in Malaysia and the migrant problem in the state. I believe the broader appeals to Sabahans for Sabah strengthens unity in the state and we share a common desire for the uplifting of development and wellbeing for all Sabahans across different races and religions.

When we go out to vote, we consider a range of issues. Sabahans consider personality, leadership and the response to their social conditions such as the challenges of rural livelihoods. The book's attention to different factors influencing voting corresponds to the different realities on the ground. Ethnic preferences are less important, as Dr Bridget Welsh's chapter in this book explains well. Dr Arnold Puyok's attention to the role of personality in rural areas is also accurate.

And so, I believe there must be a continuous call for Sabahan rights that transcends party lines. The *rakyat* do not need more leaders who are only interested in playing politics all the time, but instead need more serious, dependable statesmen, working to keep the administration in good form. We must collectively work towards more state autonomy and resources from the federal government in an effort to focus on better development projects and outcomes.

Sabahans are united in wanting more commitment from the federal government to address the imbalance in economic development. These needs are not unfounded, and if addressed, the effects of change impact not just socio-economic conditions of Sabahans but also all Malaysians. For example, with the Covid-19 pandemic impacting our economy and society, there should be more focus in ensuring that Sabahans are given the tools to combat digital poverty, where communities are not afforded ICT infrastructure or skills. Many young people in Sabah can benefit from gaining more digital literacy through access to smart devices and high-speed Internet access. Empower your weakest and you will empower all.

My professional ethos has always been to fight for what I believe is right and good for Sabah. I have met and worked with many from different sides of the political divide, and while we may have had our differences, we believe that there is always more that can be done for Sabah. I found the discussion on civil society in the book especially valuable and know that we need to collectively work with civil society to address the challenges Sabah faces.

The collection edited by Drs Bridget Welsh, Vilashini Somiah and Benjamin YH Loh sees Sabah in her uniqueness and diversity. This book helps mark a time in our history and a new political era of change and transformation. Capturing the ongoing political transformations in a period of change offers insights on how to move Sabah and Malaysia forward. The book will be an essential reference for Sabahans and those interested in Sabah politics for years to come.

Salleh Said Keruak Ph.D JP

Chief Minister of Sabah from 1994 to 1996

Acknowledgments

In the wake of the Sabah 2020 state elections, we, the editors, found ourselves discussing in great detail the drivers and outcomes of the campaign. Sabah, unlike other parts of Malaysia, has always been a political puzzle, difficult for many on the outside to decipher. As the three of us continued unpacking and piecing together what we knew of local leadership and governance, we were also confronted by the need to acknowledge the shifts and changes occurring in Sabah's politics from the ground. Sabahans and friends of Sabah, all of whom experienced the 2020 state elections first-hand, could offer great insights into how that influenced local politics thereafter.

This book was then formulated as a way to bring together scholars, experts, and intellectuals working on Sabah to provide current and contemporary views of the state. While there have been seminal and important works about Sabah in the last half century, these are few and far between, especially in recent years. And so, we began this project keeping in mind the importance of filling in what we can of the obvious gap in the literature on Sabah.

We would first like to thank two important Sabah leaders that have contributed forewords to the book. Both former chief ministers of Sabah from different parties, Salleh bin Md Said Keruak and Bernard Dompok, were kind enough to take time out of their busy schedules to offer short commentaries for this book and contemporary Sabah politics. These leaders join others among the Sabah political elite who were generous with their time and feedback. While the list is long and many prefer to remain anonymous, we would like to especially acknowledge those assisted with the book through offering insights in interviews or assistance: Abdul Rahman Dahlan, Bung Moktar Radin, Chan Foong Hin, Nixon Habi, Adrian Lasimbang, Wilfred Madius Tangau, Martin Tommy and Yong Teck Lee.

We believe that a book on Sabah politics requires plural voices. We have gathered a large and eclectic group of extraordinary writers from various walks of life, all with rich experiences with Sabah's economy, society, and politics; we are very grateful for their important contributions. We have writers representing various civil society organisations (CSO) in Sabah. In the chapters written by Beverly, Nelson, Asraf, Mahirah, Fiqah, and Auzellea,

they cast a spotlight on the important and necessary work that often goes unnoticed in protecting and improving the lives of both average and marginalised Sabahans. The efforts of CSOs are often taken for granted and we are pleased to give these selfless organisations the due recognition they deserve and we could not have done so without the help of these authors.

We are also truly fortunate to include political analysts and commentators who were willing to share their invaluable insights in this book. We are thankful to Joe, Tsu Chong and Philip for providing insightful and comprehensive summaries of the contextual issues that set the stage in Sabah. The chapters from Ei Sun, Amanda, and Rahimin provide novel and revelatory looks into narratives of the Chinese and Muslim communities of Sabah. These contributions all add texture and depth to our understanding of this highly plural state. Public commentators are not properly recognised for their on the ground knowledge and accessible contributions to knowledge. We hope that by including them here their role in adding to knowledge will be more appreciated.

Their analyses join a wonderful group of academic colleagues. The chapters by James, Marcilla, Tony, Arnold and Trixie represent some of the best works by Sabah academics. As editors, we would also like to thank our co-writers in our respective chapters, Yi Jian, and Aslam, both of whom are young talented academics and names to look out for in the future. We look forward to further collaborations with all of our contributors in the future. We thank them for their patience in the editing process, the unbelievable timeliness in responding to queries and their support in making this collection come together as it has.

This book would not have been realised were it not for the support and confidence given by our publishers, the Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD)/Gerakbudaya and the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute (ISEAS). Given the challenges of operating under the Covid-19 restrictions, Gerakbudaya continues to play an important role in the dissemination of knowledge in Malaysia; accepting this book project for publication reflects their commitment to pursuing understanding even when they are being financially challenged. ISEAS's agreement to co-publish reflects their prominent role in enriching understanding of Southeast Asia as a whole.

At ISEAS, its head of publishing Ng Kok Kiong has been gracious and supportive. Gerakbudaya's editorial team under the tenacious Pak Chong gave us the much-needed refinement and encouragement to get this book in shape and to assist us with a timely publication. We are very thankful to

the dedicated work of Janice Cheong and William Tham for assisting with the book cover/typesetting and in the minutiae of publishing, respectively. Special thanks are extended to Charles Brophy, a scholar in his own right and the captain of this book's publishing process. He was the lynchpin that pulled the different individuals together in the publishing process and helped tremendously to improve the quality of the book. We certainly could not have completed it without him – and in the publication process he is our hero.

There has also been help behind the scenes. The collection benefitted from the assistance of Jillian Simon who helped prepare the bibliography and Guo who assisted with the data analysis. Special thanks are also extended to all those who shared electoral data (you know who you are and will get a complimentary book), allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the results. We recognise the hard work of all involved and apologise if we have inadvertently left anyone out.

Last, but definitely not least, we must thank the people of Sabah. *Sabah from the Ground* would not have been possible without the kind support of the people of Sabah whose stories and history inspired each article in the book. We would like to dedicate the book to those who have lost loved ones during this difficult time. Two of our authors lost family members while this book was being written – Beverly Joeman lost her beloved father Thasius Sipanggol Joeman, and Trixie Tangit lost her beloved brother Terrance Maximus Tangit. Both men were keen to read the book and their loss is felt deeply as part of our collective family in this collection. At the time of publication, Sabah and Malaysia as a whole continues to face challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic. Sabah has been the hardest hit. This is why we also dedicate this collection to those who have lost their loved ones to Covid-19 in Sabah and Malaysia as a whole. Our hearts go out to all of you and your families.

We thank the readers of this book in advance. We hope that this book will stimulate debate and discussion. We apologise for any errors in the collection and welcome feedback. We hope that our efforts encourage more scholarship on Sabah and Sabahans. The editors' focus on the agency of ordinary Sabahans – in the politics of survival – reflects our confidence and appreciation of how Sabahans are rising above, with dignity and decency, and continuing to dream for a better future that they deserve.

Benjamin YH Loh

Vilashini Somiah

Bridget Welsh

8 April 2021

Sabah Goes to the Polls

Bridget Welsh, Benjamin YH Loh and Vilashini Somiah

On 29 July 2020, Chief Minister Shafie Apdal dissolved the state assembly to pave the way for Sabah's 16th state elections. These 'snap' polls, after only 26 months in government, were called to prevent the takeover of the government by Shafie's long-time rival Musa Aman, who had served as chief minister of the state for 15 years and whom Shafie had ousted from power after the 2018 General Election (GE14). The night before, Musa had gathered 33 state assemblypersons ('*Kumpulan 33*') in his house as a show of support, and was pressuring Sabah Governor Juhar Mahiruddin to swear his government in as he allegedly had the numbers for a majority. The federally aligned Musa, whose roots in the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), long tenure in office and connection with Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin of Perikatan Nasional (PN) had the advantage in his efforts to woo defections to his side. All of the 46 criminal charges for corruption and money laundering filed against him had been put aside a month earlier in June, giving him the opportunity to galvanise his allies and attempt a takeover of the state government.¹ Rather than have a second 'Sheraton Move', reminiscent of Pakatan Harapan's loss of government in February, Shafie turned the decision over to the electorate. When the election results came in on the night of 26 September, Shafie and his Warisan Plus coalition, comprising his party Warisan, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and the United Progressive Kinabalu

¹ Nurbiati Hamdan, 'Former Sabah CM Musa Aman acquitted of 46 charges of corruption, money laundering', *The Star*, 9 June 2020, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/06/09/former-sabah-cm-musa-aman-acquitted-of-46-charges-of-corruption-money-laundering>

Organization (UPKO), had lost power to the newly formed Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS), a nine-party alliance helmed by new Chief Minister Hajiji Noor from Bersatu, the prime minister's party.²

The 2020 Sabah state election (also referred to as PRN2020 below) was a hard-fought campaign, and national attention, resources and party supporters concentrated on Sabah. For many in Peninsular Malaysia, the focus on this Borneo state was a necessary learning experience – the recognition of Sabah's diversity and the state's important differences from other parts of Malaysia. For others, this was more of the same – politicians fighting for power and the spoils of power – often at the expense of everyday citizens. The tragic reality of the spread of Covid-19 around Sabah's polls, leading to 'super-spreaders' of the virus and a deadly third wave – which many blamed on the politicians themselves³ – has reinforced cynicism and, in many ways, overshadowed the important dynamics of the election. Yet for the 1.2 million Sabahans who were engaged in the election through campaign appeals and mobilisation, the election provided an opportunity to participate in a political process that has long been driven by elite interests and rivalries so aptly on display in the 'Sheraton Move'. Despite the political fatigue and Covid-19 risks, two-thirds of registered voters (66.6 per cent) came out to vote, shaping a decisive result that led to Sabah's fifth change in government and the return of Barisan Nasional (BN)/UMNO into power in a new alliance and in a secondary role.

How did this happen? Was this the product of the decisions of leaders and campaign outcomes, or was this driven by structural conditions tied to federal-state relations, political legacies and underlying socio-economic factors? Explaining the events of the Sabah 2020 state elections – campaign, results and implications – is at the core of this book. In order to do so, we take a broader lens than the usual post-election analyses. Given the relative dearth of analysis and understanding of Sabah politics, we – scholars, analysts, journalists and social activists – discuss the wider context and

² GRS was formed on 13 September with the PN parties of Bersatu, STAR, SAPP and PAS, and BN, which comprised of UMNO, PBRS and MCA. PBS also joined, making nine parties in total.

³ 'Suhakam: Politicians, Campaigners least compliant with Covid-19 SOPs during Sabah polls,' *Malay Mail*, 21 January 2021, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/01/21/suhakam-politicians-campaigners-least-compliant-with-covid-19-sops-during-s/1942682>.

different currents of Sabah's politics. Our aim is to place PRN2020 within a broader context of changing political dynamics in the state, and in Malaysia more generally. Importantly, all of the book's contributors were on the ground during the Sabah campaign, with the majority of them originating from Sabah itself. The chapters individually, and the book collectively, aim to offer a more 'on the ground' perspective, to reinterpret and reflect on Sabah's contemporary politics.

Reviewing Results

The heart of the discussion centres on the election: a political contest on many levels. For Sabahans, this election was about who would lead their state as rivalries and personalities faced off. When Musa Aman was not slated as a candidate, the contest became one of Shafie against a long list of GRS alternatives, from UMNO's Bung Moktar and Bersatu's Hajiji Noor to Parti Solidariti Tanah Airku Rakyat Sabah (STAR)'s Jeffrey Kitingan and dark horses such as Bersatu's Masidi Manjun. The personalities were tied to different parties, with long political histories, different agendas and similar ambitions. This was the second time a non-BN allied government was aiming to hold onto power. In 1994, while winning the election, Joseph Pairin Kitingan's Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) lost out to defections which allowed the BN (dominated by UMNO) to come back into government.⁴ In 2018, when no one party won a majority, defections – in this case from UPKO, which was the same party that had formed after splitting off from PBS twenty-four years earlier – played a role in shoring up a new Shafie-led government. It would be defections from all of the parties in his alliance that would threaten Shafie's downfall in July 2020 and serve as a catalyst for the polls.

The GE14 vote had been one largely against UMNO and its leadership nationally.⁵ Concerns about corruption, ethnic exclusion, religious freedom⁶

⁴ James Chin, 'The Sabah State election of 1994: end of Kadazan unity', *Asian Survey* 34, no. 10 (1994): 904-915.

⁵ See James Chin, 'Sabah and Sarawak in the 14th General Election 2018 (GE14): local factors and state nationalism', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 37, no. 3 (2018): 173-192 and Arnold Puyok, 'The Appeal and Future of the 'Borneo Agenda' in Sabah,' in Johan Savaranamuttu, Hock Guan Lee, and Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman (eds), *Coalitions in Collision: Malaysia's 13th General Elections*, (KL & Singapore: ISEAS & SIRD, 2016), 199-220.

⁶ Arnold Puyok, 'Rise of Christian political consciousness and mobilisation,' in

and inadequate sharing of resources fueled frustrations and anger after a long tenure in office for the party and fifteen years of Musa Aman as chief minister. The state-based party Warisan capitalised on the national call for 'change' and state nationalism to win seats, allying itself with Pakatan Harapan locally and nationally to take office. Warisan/PH came into power with a litany of promises for reform and deliverables, many of which they failed to realise or deliver, and spent only 26 months in office. In fact, many of these promises were impossible to deliver, while others illustrated the serious governance challenges Sabah faced as a state on Malaysia's periphery, long neglected in terms of development, with inadequate control over its resources and facing persistent inequalities.

For those in Peninsular Malaysia the contest was about national leadership. The Sabah contest was one in which the February-ousted Pakatan Harapan opposition was pitted against Muhyiddin's PN. Shafie was seen to be holding the mantle for reform, and his decision to dissolve the assembly was lauded as a step for democracy as opposed to PN's 'backdoor' takeover. From across the South China Sea, the contest was portrayed as 'good versus evil' with Shafie's 'unity' call and prioritisation of everyone over one community or religion as part of a righteous narrative. Even after the September loss, he is still a contender to lead Malaysia, and PRN2020 increased his national profile. Many Warisan and PH supporters believed that not only would Muhyiddin be tested, but he would also be rejected by voters.

This discourse stood in stark contrast to the perception of the election as an opportunity for the prime minister and his party to show their popularity, strengthen their party's fortunes and consolidate their leadership nationally. While Muhyiddin aimed to show he was in charge and claim a mandate for this from Sabah, his (then) main ally UMNO saw Sabah as an arena to strengthen their comeback which had been boosted in their victory in the Kimanis January 2020 by-election. For PN party supporters, who came in droves from Kuala Lumpur to support the various PRN2020 campaigns, Sabah's polls were an affirmation of their control and an endorsement of their leadership. National ambitions were close at hand throughout the contest.

For many ordinary Sabahans, especially those living on the ground, the

election was about themselves – their hopes and dreams intertwined with grievances and concerns about displacement. As with Malaysia on a whole, there were different perspectives about the election, often tied to partisan loyalties and views of the federal-state relationship. For many Sabahans, there was little regard for who ruled in Putrajaya, or even Kota Kinabalu for that matter, as they looked to their own local representatives as their conduit to government and services. Many felt that it did not matter who was in office at all, as they struggled with managing everyday life during a pandemic and an economic downturn. While leaders from the peninsula saw an opportunity for themselves, some Sabahans saw the election as an opportunity for change, continuity or new forms of patronage. Concerns about unity touted in Bangsar were less salient than maintaining dignity in the face of economic hardship in Telupid or Lamag. As the election approached, there was excitement as Sabahans understood that PRN2020 would be a competitive contest, with no clear winner from the outset.

When the ballots were counted the results showed three important trends. Foremost, that Warisan Plus had lost. It had only secured 32 seats, compared with GRS which had won 38. With the three additional pro-GRS independents winning,⁷ GRS had secured a stable majority, even without the additional six nominated seats it could add constitutionally to the state assembly. Second, GRS's victory was a collective one, where all of the major parties contributed, as shown in Table 1. UMNO won the most seats, followed by Bersatu, PBS and STAR. One of these parties leaving GRS could affect the coalition's stability and this forced difficult rambunctious negotiations on positions on election night. Of the GRS parties, Bersatu gained the most, securing a political base in another state outside of Johor and consolidating a foothold in Borneo. Ironically, the party Mahathir Mohamad created and insisted should be allowed into Sabah helped to bring down his political ally, Shafie. While UMNO might have won the most seats, it lost three seats compared with 2018 (largely due to the defections it experienced to Bersatu).

⁷ The pro-GRS candidates that won were Rubin Balang of Kemabong, Ruddy Awah of Pitas and Masiung Banah of Kuamut.

Table 1: Sabah 2020 Election Results by Party

	Votes	% Votes	Seats	% Seats	Changes in Seats
Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS)	316,049	43.2	38	52.1	7
United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)	122,358	16.7	14	19.2	-3
Malaysian United Indigenous Party (Bersatu)	86,383	11.8	11	15.1	11
United Sabah Party (PBS)	49,941	6.8	7	9.6	1
Homeland Solidarity Party (STAR)	35,586	4.9	6	8.2	4
United Sabah People's Party (PBRS)	9,687	1.3	0	0.0	-1
Warisan Plus	317,541	43.4	32	43.8	3
Sabah Heritage Party (Warisan)	186,749	25.5	23	31.5	2
Democratic Action Party (DAP)	69,477	9.5	6	8.2	0
People's Justice Party (PKR)	28,372	3.9	2	2.7	0
United Progressive Kinabalu Organization (UPKO)	29,473	4.0	1	1.4	-5

Finally, Warisan Plus's defeat was not a devastating one, at least not in terms of the numbers. Warisan held its political ground, winning 22 seats, with its coalition partners DAP and PKR maintaining their seats. UPKO, which was not originally allied with Warisan/PH in GE14, lost the most seats (5), and 11 of the 12 it contested. These seats were never in Warisan Plus's hands in the first place, as they were originally won by UPKO while it was in BN in 2018. This said, the loss speaks to the challenge Warisan Plus had in reaching out across communities, notably to the Kadazan, Dusun and Murut (KDM) communities, and the lack of appreciation of the need to do so before the campaign began. The last-minute distribution of land titles, for example, was not able to sway many with longer-standing grievances.⁸ The results suggest that Warisan Plus was not ready for the 'snap' polls in

⁸ Tarrence Tan, 'Native land rights a hot topic as Sabah polls approach,' *The Star*, 28 August 2020, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/08/28/native-land-rights-a-hot-topic-as-sabah-polls-approach>. For a broader understanding of these issues see: Amity A. Doolittle, *Property and politics in Sabah, Malaysia: Native struggles over land rights*, (University of Washington Press, 2011).

that there were clear areas of governance which had not been addressed. The incumbent's campaign promises of the past would come under scrutiny.

Recognising Resentments

The authors in this collection offer a range of explanations for the outcomes – the turnover, the losses and victories and the meaning of the results for Sabah politics, Sabahans and Malaysians. We do not agree on many points, nor should we. The aim is to provide insights that go beyond narrow explanations such as those outlined above – that the outcome was the product of the shortcomings of one political party or even a particular community. PRN2020 should be understood to be the outcome of a multitude of factors, reflecting the realities of Sabah politics before the election, dynamics in the campaign itself and ongoing changes taking place within the society and polity at large – including those occurring in Malaysia as a whole. What our collection urges the reader to do is to adopt different lenses to understand and see Sabah – its complexity and contrasts.

Despite Sabah's central role in forming Malaysia and the dynamism of the state's politics, comparatively little has been written about its elections and politics, more generally, especially when compared to its southern neighbor Sarawak or Peninsular Malaysia. It is almost as if the 'Land Below the Wind' has been passed by, echoing the neglect many Sabahans feel in the inadequate attention the state has received in terms of resources and services. Some of the important books on the state's politics, such as the account of former Sabah Attorney General Herman Luping, are banned,⁹ and many others are just not available at a cost that most Sabahans can afford. Malaysia's national history books leave out meaningful discussion of Sabah leaders and peoples – indeed, treating Sabah as the periphery. Nevertheless, as government archival material about the 1960s has become available and social media has expanded, there is now more discussion about the state's history and politics. This book's discussion aims to be a part of these ongoing discussions and hopefully enriches and provokes debate.

A place to start is to recognise that many of the narratives of Sabah politics are largely those of its elite and may themselves be limited. This can

⁹ Herman Luping, *Sabah's Dilemma: The Political History of Sabah, 1960-1994* (Magnus Books, 1994).

be said, for example, about the ‘*Ketuanan Melayu*’ discourse in Peninsular Malaysia,¹⁰ as historical interpretations about social-political contracts, rights and realities are often told by those in power. As many Malays and non-Malays can attest to, the story of power in Malaysia is more than a racialist frame of superiority. Lived experiences are often disconnected from politicised narratives, while the narratives themselves remain politically salient.

This said, the main political narrative in Sabah is one of resentment. Discussion centres around the Malaysia Agreement of 1963 (MA63).¹¹ This document, written nearly sixty years ago, is portrayed as embedding the rights of Sabahans and it is argued that if the different provisions within this agreement are restored, Sabahans will get access to the resources and rights they deserve. The anguish of years of injustice has concentrated on an agreement of the past – leading to an outpouring of activism and mobilisation around state nationalism to ‘correct’ the federal-state relationship. There are indeed many who believe in ‘time travel’, hoping that a return to the past can set Sabah on a different path.

This idealism in no way takes away from the reality of legitimate grievances. Sabahans have, for years, openly vented their unhappiness that there was no fulfillment of MA63, except partially in relation to immigration, and have not had their status restored as an equal partner that formed the Federation. The agreement was written with specific memorandums for each Bornean territory to ensure a safe and successful decolonising process as well as to clearly articulate equal terms for the formation of the Federation between the territories. Over time, the value of the MA63 has eroded, with a rewording of the agreement reducing both Sabah and Sarawak to mere states in 1976.

The issues have long been about more than those in the document. History has brought witness to underlying distrust and indignities. Sabah

¹⁰ James Chin, ‘From *Ketuanan Melayu* to *Ketuanan Islam*: UMNO and the Malaysian Chinese’, in Bridget Welsh (ed.) *The End of UMNO* (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2016), 226-273.

¹¹ Vilashini Somiah, ‘What Is the MA63? And Why It Is Important to Sabah and Sarawak’, *New Naratif*, 8 October 2020, <https://newnaratif.com/comic/what-is-ma63/> and James Chin, ‘The 1963 Malaysia Agreement (MA63): Sabah and Sarawak and the Politics of Historical Grievances’, in Sophie Lemiere (ed.) *Minorities Matter: Malaysian Politics and People*, (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), 75-91.

has been perceived by BN as a 'fixed deposit' state for many years, in which political support from the state was crucial for the coalition's continuous survival at the federal level – and at times for the survival of UMNO leaders.¹² And Sabah's history bore witness to federal intervention in state politics¹³ on multiple occasions, often without history being properly told. From mysteries in helicopter crashes to the Project IC of the 1980s involving social engineering through immigration,¹⁴ the federal-state relationship has been a troubled one intertwined with inequality and a perceived lack of respect.¹⁵

After over 58 years, the resource-rich state of Sabah remains one of the most underdeveloped states in Malaysia. It has the highest poverty rate based on the 2019 Poverty Line Income (PGK) calculation.¹⁶ Sabah is lagging behind the Klang Valley by 40 years in terms of infrastructure and development.¹⁷ Allocations for development under BN have increased throughout the years but socio-economic growth is low, with high unemployment and low wages.¹⁸ Sabah's economy relies on the extraction of

¹² Arnold Puyok and Piya Raj Sukhani, 'Sabah: breakthrough in the fixed deposit state', *The Round Table* 109, no. 2 (2020): 209-224 and James Chin and Arnold Puyok, 'Going against the tide: Sabah and the 2008 Malaysian general election', *Asian Politics & Policy* 2, no. 2 (2010): 219-235.

¹³ James Chin, 'GE14 In East Malaysia: MA63 and Marching to a Different Drum,' in Daljit Singh and Malcolm Cook (ed.) *Southeast Asian Affairs 2019* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020), 211-222.

¹⁴ RCI Commissioners, *Report of the Commission of Enquiry on Immigrants in Sabah*, Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia (2014), <http://legacy.sapp.org.my/rci/RCI-Eng.pdf>.

¹⁵ James Chin, 'Politics of federal intervention in Malaysia, with reference to Sarawak, Sabah and Kelantan', *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 35, no. 2 (1997): 96-120.

¹⁶ Avila Geraldine, 'Sabah Ranks as Malaysia's Poorest State, Again,' *New Straits Times*, 20 September 2020, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/09/625711/sabah-ranks-malaysias-poorest-state-again>.

¹⁷ M. Niaz Asadullah and Jeron Joseph, 'Concern over Rising Inequality in Sabah,' *The Edge Markets*, 6 September 2018, <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/concern-over-rising-inequality-sabah>.

¹⁸ 'Seeking Economic Transformation in Sabah,' *The Malaysian Insight*, 4 July 2018, <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/70347> and 'Greater trouble ahead if Sabah economy not managed well warns think tank,' *Free Malaysia Today*, 19 September 2020, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/09/19/greater-trouble-ahead-if-sabah-economy-not-managed-well-warns-think-tank/>.

raw materials, as the stunting of children's growth and malnutrition from the inadequate access to affordable nutritious food for the population festers.¹⁹ There is also a large gap between the rich and poor in Sabah.²⁰ Income and wealth are concentrated around Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan and Tawau, largely through investment and tourism. Rural areas remain largely poor, with no access to clean water, electricity, and roads. Many – too many – live in conditions of squalor that are not acceptable.

From Kuala Lumpur, Sabah is seen through quite different lenses. The hardships and inequalities are construed in a framework by those in power that see Sabah's struggles as their own with their federally oriented solutions. When it does not conform, efforts are invested to make it do so. Since Sabah's entrance into the Malaysian Federation in 1963, UMNO has been seen as wanting Sabah to replicate the BN model of Peninsular Malaysia, in seeing the two principles of Malay supremacy (*Ketuanan Melayu*) and, from the 1970s, Islamic supremacy (*Ketuanan Islam*) adopted.²¹ This was especially so since the largest native Sabahan communities, the KDM and Chinese, were non-Muslims. Immigration, seat allocations, leadership and wealth, it was understood, should be controlled and distributed to assure that Sabah conformed to federally construed ideals. Over time, policies and practices become less responsive to Sabah's diversity and local conditions. For example, even though Malaysia employs an affirmative action policy to uplift the economically disadvantaged, 90 per cent of these privileges are given to Peninsular Malays, some to Sabah Muslims, and rarely to non-Muslims.²² This is in spite of the fact that poverty in Sabah crosses ethnic lines. Those that challenge this framing and these practices with calls for

¹⁹ Wan Manan Wan Muda, Jomo Kwame Sundaram and Tan Zhai Gen, *Addressing Malnutrition in Malaysia*, Khazanah Research Institute, September 2019, http://www.krinstitute.org/assets/contentMS/img/template/editor/Discussion%20Paper_Address%20Malnutrition%20in%20Malaysia.pdf.

²⁰ Martin Ravallion, *Ethnic Inequality and Poverty in Malaysia Since 1969*. No. w25640, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2019.

²¹ James Chin, 'Exporting the BN/UMNO model,' in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Malaysia*, 83-92.

²² Azlan, Romzi Ationg, Jualang Gansau, and Andreas Totu, 'Ethnohistorical Analysis on the Resurgence of Multiracial Political Ideology through "Sabah for Sabahan" Slogan in Sabah, Malaysia', ASEAN/Asian Academic Society International Conference (2018), 186-94.

autonomy or even a substantive review of MA63 are seen to be challenging federal power.

Therein lies the tug of war between the federal government and Sabah. The federal government sees Sabah as an important supply state which it must control tightly to mould in its own image. In contrast many, although not all, Sabahans want more autonomy and envision a different future for the state. The elite conversations on MA63 reflect this contestation. For those on the ground, a history of marginalisation and neglect brings home the imbalanced federal-state relationship.

Revealing Reasons

It is thus not surprising that explanations of Sabah politics often begin with a focus on ethnic and state nationalism. In the 1980s and 1990s scholars pointed to the rise of KDM empowerment through the rise of PBS led by Joseph Pairin.²³ The empowerment of this KDM/state-based party led to its cooptation by BN and later the entrance of UMNO into Sabah. Ironically, the resentment over representation, displacement and autonomy grew stronger, not just among the KDM community.²⁴ The anger was increasingly directed at UMNO. From 2008 onwards a state nationalism movement gained momentum, driven by state-based parties such as STAR and Warisan, with the aim of ending UMNO's control of Sabah in its sights. This happened in GE14.²⁵ At the same time, UMNO developed its own political base in Sabah, tied to party machinery, patronage and the changing demography of the state. A political polarisation of Sabah politics also took root, with many UMNO supporters viewing Kuala Lumpur as a means for advancement – and, for others, survival. When one looks at the popular vote over the last few elections in Sabah (43.2 per cent GRS versus 43.4 per cent

²³ James Chin, 'Going east: UMNO's entry into Sabah politics', *Asian Journal of Political Science* 7, no. 1 (1999): 20-40.

²⁴ James Chin and Arnold Puyok, 'Going against the tide: Sabah and the 2008 Malaysian general election', *Asian Politics & Policy* 2, no. 2 (2010): 219-235.

²⁵ Arnold Puyok, 'Ethnic Factor In The 2008 Malaysian General Election: The Case of The Kadazan Dusun (KD) In Sabah', *Jebat: Malaysian Journal of History, Politics & Strategic Studies* 35 (2020): 1-16 and Arnold Puyok and Tony Paridi Bagang, 'Ethnicity, Culture and Indigenous Leadership in Modern Politics: The Case of the KadazanDusun in Sabah, East Malaysia', *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies* 29 (2011): 177-97.

Warisan Plus in 2020) it is clear that there is a divided electorate, and that there are differences within Sabah itself over the federal-state relationship.

These differences highlight the need to adopt multiple explanations to understand Sabah politics. Six heuristic lenses have been primarily applied by different scholars. The first and more prominent contemporary interpretation emphasises state nationalism – the growing division between the federal and state governments.²⁶ This underscores the adoption of state-based parties and political rhetoric around MA63. Second, and arguably even more salient over multiple elections, are appeals to ethnic nationalism, from KDM rights to loyalties around religion.²⁷ Early scholarship on Sabah politics emphasised the differences of local communities and how these identities shaped political mobilisation and engagement.²⁸ Sabah – like most of Malaysia – has political parties that rely on particular ethnic appeals, and repeatedly voting has been understood along ethnic lines. Studies regularly focus on the political behavior of a particular community – a lens three of our contributors adopt in the chapters of our book.

²⁶ See the following for good discussions of the federal-state relations broadly: Regina Lim, *Federal-state Relations in Sabah, Malaysia: The Berjaya Administration, 1976-85* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008); Francis Loh Kok Wah, 'Restructuring federal-state relations in Malaysia: from centralised to co-operative federalism?' *The Round Table* 99, no. 407 (2010): 131-140; Mohammad Agus Yusoff, 'The politics of centre-state conflict: The Sabah experience under the ruling Sabah Alliance (1963-1976)', *Jebat: Malaysian Journal of History, Politics & Strategic Studies* 26 (2020); James Chin, 'Politics of federal intervention in Malaysia, with reference to Sarawak, Sabah and Kelantan', *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 35, no. 2 (1997): 96-120; Tricia Yeoh, *Federal-State Relations under the Pakatan Harapan Government* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020). See the following for discussion of the relationship in campaigns: Bruce Gale, 'Politics at the Periphery: A Study of the 1981 and 1982 Election Campaigns in Sabah', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 6, no. 1 (1984): 26-49; Sabihah Osman, 'Sabah state elections: implications for Malaysian unity', *Asian Survey* 32, no. 4 (1992): 380-391; Mohamad Nawab Mohamad Osman, 'A Transitioning Sabah In A Changing Malaysia', *Kajian Malaysia* 35, no. 1 (2017): 23-40.

²⁷ See, for example, Farish A. Noor, 'The 13th Malaysian general elections from a Sabah perspective', *The Round Table* 102, no. 6 (2013): 541-548 and Arnold Puyok and Tony Paridi Bagang, 'Ethnicity, Culture and Indigenous Leadership in Modern Politics: The Case of the KadazanDusun in Sabah, East Malaysia', *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies* 29 (2011): 177-97.

²⁸ Robert Milne, 'Patrons, clients and ethnicity: The case of Sarawak and Sabah in Malaysia', *Asian Survey* 13, no. 10 (1973): 891-907.

Research on Sabah has also led the way in a focus on personality and patronage.²⁹ Personal ties and the performance and accessibility of local leaders has consistently been emphasised. Sabah's low population, its geography with a large share of Sabahans living in rural and remote areas, and the state's challenging social conditions which reinforce reciprocal ties have underscored a focus on hierarchical relationships. These explanations are often intertwined with ethnicity, with the central role of the *Huguan Siou*, the paramount leader of the KDM, highlighted. The entry of UMNO into Sabah has extended the discussion about patronage further, drawing attention to party machinery and the expansion of vote buying and money politics.³⁰ Corruption has been seen to become an integral part of Sabah politics. Other scholars have highlighted the role of developmentalism – development promises – as a means to woo support.³¹

These varied explanations broadly fall into two paradigms – those that highlight political narratives for mobilisation and those that centre on vertical political engagement. Research that draws attention to the federal-state relationship prioritises more systemic inequalities. What is striking about our understanding of Sabah politics is how much is left out. Sabahans are given little agency – instead they are acted upon or mobilised by elite political narratives or politicians. The role of elites is prioritised. There is little attention paid to differences among Sabahans beyond ethnicity, and to a lesser extent the urban-rural divide. Sabah is acknowledged to be unique, but Sabah politics has been seen narrowly.

Rethinking Analysis

This book aims to move beyond these approaches. While acknowledging these established scholarly frameworks is useful and relevant for understanding Sabah politics – as many of the chapters in the book show – they are inadequate.

²⁹ See Faisal S. Hazis, 'Patronage, Power and Prowess: Barisan Nasional's Equilibrium Dominance in East Malaysia', *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies* 33, no. 2 (2015): 1-24.

³⁰ James Chin, 'Going east: UMNO's entry into Sabah politics', *Asian Journal of Political Science* 7, no. 1 (1999): 20-40.

³¹ Francis Loh Kok Wah, 'Developmentalism and the limits of democratic discourse' in Francis Loh Kok Wah and Khoo Boo Teik (eds), *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices* (London: Curzon, 2002), 19-50

The shortcomings fall into three categories. Generally, these approaches often underestimate the pluralism within Sabah – the differences of views within ethnic communities, and the importance of other social cleavages. Intentionally, the essays in this collection engage with different forms of identity and different perspectives. Special attention is placed on the role of generational, gender and class differences. An integral part of this is the inclusion of scholars from different academic disciplines outside of political science, notably anthropology, communication and economics, and the inclusion of journalists and activists. The contributors use different methods of analysis. While some base their arguments on data from ethnography or quantitative data from election results, others rely on building their arguments from interviews, historical interpretations as well as from personal experience. The only common thread is the shared experience of being on the ground during PRN2020.

Second, we aim to contextualise the discussion within a wider context of changing politics in Sabah. Elections decide who governs (when there is not an Emergency declaration) but they are often aberrations. This collection addresses a wide range of issues and themes that have been and continue to be relevant in the Sabah space; topics of ethnicity, belonging, economy, governance, indigeneity, activism and leadership, with many of the issues overlapping. We bring in discussions, for example, of policies and civil society activism to enrich the context of Sabah politics. Not only do these areas influence the election through who runs, the agendas and grievances, but they persist long after the election is over, shaping the lived experiences of politics.

By going wide, the additional aim is to bring the voices of more Sabahans into the discussion. We recognise that many of our contributors are members of the elite themselves, but their attention to youths, the less disadvantaged and more marginalised groups aims for greater inclusivity. By starting from an appreciation of difference, we work to unpack the systemic processes and conditions found in Sabah that may have limited previous attempts to discuss Sabah's politics at large. Multidisciplinary work allows us to understand quandaries both from the top-down and the bottom-up, helping us to build knowledge and challenge current thinking. Ultimately, whether complementing or contrasting, the chapters in the collection offer an opportunity to rethink Sabah's past, present and future. By no means is our collection fully representative of the issues involved, but it aims to move the analysis forward.

Reading Ahead

We have divided the chapters into four interconnected sections: context, narratives, campaigning and results. The breakdown of the sixteen chapters into these sections provides an easy way to understand the Sabah election for both those unfamiliar and familiar with Sabah. Many of the chapters recontextualise or take alternative views of longstanding issues and concerns.

We start the discussion with attention to context by looking at Shafie's Warisan/PH government in office. The first chapter by Chan Tsu Chong offers insights into the successes and failures of the former government. It was clear that the Warisan/PH administration had high hopes for success. And, as Chan notes, there were many successes. However, poor economic performance and a failure to follow up on campaign promises, especially greater state autonomy, left the government vulnerable going into the elections, ultimately contributing to its defeat.

The second chapter by Johan Arriffin Samad tackles the difficult issue of MA63 and state autonomy more broadly. He highlights the many attempts to restore the original agreement by numerous parties and shows that progress was made in the past few years, especially under Warisan/PH, but serious gaps and obstacles remain. Johan's chapter outlines the contentious issues facing the current PN Muhyiddin/Hajiji governments and in the process illustrates that the state's national narrative remains strong.

Economic conditions were also impactful in the 2020 election. James Alin and Marcilla Malasius look at the problem of high unemployment in the state. Even factoring for the Covid-19 economic downturn, they found that unemployment rates were rising due to unrealistic expectations, mismanagement and latent issues under Warisan/PH's governance. While the Warisan/PH government recognised the issue and implemented a heartfelt campaign to promote jobs, their performance in power fell short, and arguably was destined to fall short given structural problems facing Sabah's economy.

Representing civil society organisations (CSOs), Beverly Joeman, Nelson Dino and Asraf Sharafi Mohammad Azhar write about the roles these organisations play in representing Sabahan interests against corrupt and inefficient governance. Their chapter highlights the role of civil society as a political 'third force' to provide a check-and-balance against governmental and political powers, and to serve regular Sabahans who are left behind at the grassroots level. In particular, they draw attention to mobilisation

around the environment, electoral reform and social inequality, especially the treatment of undocumented persons.

Two chapters specifically address the thorny issue of immigration and undocumented persons in Sabah – arguably the most prominent issue shaping the narrative of Sabah politics.³² Tied to perceptions of displacement and belonging, this issue provokes strong emotions and remains at the core of the state's politics. While labeling includes 'illegal', 'irregular' and 'PTI/PATI' (abbreviations for *pendatang asing tanpa izin* or foreign migrants without permission) we use 'irregular migrants' in this book insofar as possible. Vilashini Somiah and Aslam Abd Jalil offer an insightful chapter on how regional differences in Sabah, between the west and the 'treacherous' east, influence narratives and shape politics. Using interviews with youths, Trixie Tangit finds that young voters are not as driven by ethnocentric politics. They prefer candidates who embrace pluralism and are focused on representing the communities rather than themselves.

Looking at the PRN2020 campaign, journalist Philip Golingai presents first-hand accounts from Sabah politicians over their strategies and rhetoric to engage with the electorate. With interviews conducted after the election, both government and opposition representatives reflected on their successes and failures during the campaign and what the future holds for Sabah. Benjamin YH Loh and Yi Jian Ho take a closer look at how social media campaigning took place in these elections and analyse the impact of 'cybertroopers' on online discussions. While cybertroopers were out in force, their impact was not as devastating as in Peninsular Malaysia. They show that social media both reflected and expanded political space in Sabah. In her first individual chapter, Bridget Welsh provides an analysis of campaigning on the ground during the elections. Based on ethnographic observations and interviews, she lays out the highly contrasting approaches employed by both Warisan Plus and GRS and shows that a 'Sabah style' of campaigning emerged, tied to masculinity and the exploitation of local conditions on the ground. Undi Sabah leaders Mahirah Marzuki, Fiqah Roslan, and Auzellea Kristin Mozihimin write about their experiences with Undi Sabah and their efforts to engage with the youths during the

³² Catherine Allerton, 'Contested statelessness in Sabah, Malaysia: Irregularity and the politics of recognition', *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 15, no. 3 (2017): 250-268.

campaign. They show that youths played a major role in the elections, and that despite growing engagement, more is needed to strengthen engagement with younger voters.

The final section of the book turns to the results. Bridget Welsh begins the discussion with a detailed study of the electorate and voting behavior along different social cleavages. She finds that the impact of gender and class differences have been inadequately appreciated and argues that a more holistic approach is needed for a better understanding of voting. She turns to the results, suggesting that changes from the addition of 13 new seats, postal voting and turnout did influence outcomes in the competitive contest, but notes that persistent patterns in voting along polarised lines are becoming more entrenched.

Three chapters adopt the traditional ethnic lens to understand the electoral outcome. Oh Ei Sun and Amanda Yin Yeo take a historical look, exploring why Chinese Sabahans stood so firmly behind Warisan Plus despite the fact that Peninsular Chinese were growing disheartened with PH. They discuss how Chinese Sabahans contrast to their counterparts in Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia. They argue that Chinese Sabahans are more self-reliant and less dependent on government support, which affords them greater agency to vote based on larger ideals rather than simple self-preservation. Arnold Puyok and Tony Paridi focus on the 'KDM factor' in the campaign. They describe how the homogenisation of the KDM community dilutes and diminishes their nuanced political participation. At the same time, they argue that the communities focus on personalities rather than political dogma, and as a voting bloc they adopted more conservative voting patterns. Mohd Rahimin Mustafa examines how Islam is shaping Sabah politics and how Muslim politics has evolved, with cooperation and divisions both evident in PRN2020. He argues that the dynamics among Muslim Bumiputera are being shaped by Peninsular Malaysia, but simultaneously, conditions within Sabah itself and competition among elites are transforming the state's politics.

Finally, to conclude the book, Bridget Welsh, Benjamin YH Loh and Vilashini Somiah reflect on the fallout from the election. The end of the elections did not signal a return to normalcy in Sabah as Covid-19 cases rose precipitously, leading to a third wave of infections throughout Malaysia. The new GRS government, which faced bitter infighting immediately after winning, left Sabah without a strong leadership to see it through the

coronavirus crisis. Our conclusion discusses what this new government spells for Sabah and Malaysia's future. In the process we bring together the various findings of the contributors, and flesh out a different, more ordinary, people-centred approach for understanding Sabah politics moving forward – the politics of survival.