

Scratching the itch out east with Warisan



Walking around the streets of Kota Kinabalu (or KK as the locals call it), one gets the impression that a change of government is imminent. Unlike Sarawak, there's a sense something 'big' will happen on 9th May, polling day of Malaysia's 14th general elections (GE14).

The GE14 excitement is primarily due to a new political party called Parti Warisan Sabah (Sabah Heritage Party). Parti Warisan was formed by Datuk Seri Haji Mohd. Shafie bin Haji Apdal, a former UMNO vice-president (this means he is one of the top five elected leaders in the party) and Darrell Leiking, a MP from opposition party Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). In 2015, Shafie was suddenly sacked from UMNO after he was removed as a federal minister for going against Prime Minister Najib Razak. Shafie was rumoured to have been one of the few ministers who repeatedly raised the 1MDB scandal in cabinet. Despite strong overtures from PKR and Sabah-based opposition parties, Shafie decided that Sabah nationalism was the best platform for him. Together with Leiking, the incumbent MP for Penampang, otherwise known as the heartland of Kadazan Dusun politics, they formed Parti Warisan in October 2016.

The rationale for Parti Warisan is simple. The three major voting blocs in Sabah are the Chinese,

the Muslims, and the non-Muslim Kadazan Dusuns. While UMNO Sabah was able to unite most of the Sabah Muslims under it, the Kadazan Dusuns were deliberately spread among more than a dozen parties. Parties that claimed to represent them include Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRs), United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO) on the Sabah Barisan Nasional (BN) side, and almost all the opposition parties including the major ones such as PKR, DAP, Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) and Parti Solidariti Tanah Airku (STAR). All claimed to represent Kadazan Dusun interests.

The Chinese community had its share of political parties claiming to represent them as well. In addition to the PKR, DAP, and SAPP, there are PBS, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Sabah MCA, Sabah Gerakan, and several smaller parties.

In other words, there are endless choices for non-Muslim Sabahans when it comes to political parties. In fact, there are more than 30 political parties registered to operate in Sabah, in a state population of only 3.5 million.

What is needed was a single opposition party with a clear political platform for both Muslims and non-Muslims to come together, under the banner of “Sabah for Sabahans”. This is nothing new – the last party that successfully used this slogan to capture power was PBS back in 1985. Now it may be Warisan’s turn.

Warisan’s formula is remarkably simple. Shafie is to deliver the Muslim vote from the East Coast and Leiking is to deliver the Kadazan Dusun vote from the west coast of the state. The Chinese vote is left in the hands of Junz Wong, the Likas state assemblyman elected under the DAP banner, and prior to his defection to Warisan, the Sabah DAP secretary. Both Leiking and Wong are ‘brand names’ in their respective communities.

Since Warisan’s founding just under two years ago, the party has gained traction on the ground. Many of its events attract thousands and recent ceramah (political rallies) saw crowds not usually associated with new political parties. Many activists previously with the mainstream opposition parties such as DAP and PKR have moved towards Warisan.

The party has gained traction on the ground with youth voters as well, in part because it has a star recruit. Jo-Anna Sue Henley Rampas, a [former Unduk Ngadau](#) (Harvest Queen, a high-profile event in Sabah), not only gives Warisan the ‘glam’ look but she has also used her social media presence to recruit young people into Warisan.

Warisan has come to an [electoral pact with PH recently](#), and is widely seen now as a major threat to Sabah BN, especially in the non-Muslim constituencies. Leiking and other Kadazan Dusun leaders in Warisan appear to have gain traction among young Kadazan Dusun voters.

The key question now is whether Shafie is able to deliver the Muslim vote, especially from the east

coast constituencies. Shafie has complicated family connections with many of the Muslim seats in the east coast. Many of his political opponents in BN are actually related to him. One constant allegation is that Shafie is linked to the rebels who stormed [Lahad Datu](#) back in 2013. Many of the relatives of those killed in 2013 are Sabah voters and they may vote either way.

It would be foolish to say that Warisan's big crowds will translate into victories on 9th May. Sabah BN still has a magic pill, otherwise known as 'Vitamin M', as in 'M' for money. 'Vitamin M' is very effective in Muslim areas and rural Kadazan Dusun constituencies.

Warisan's best bet is the Sabah voters' historical '10-year itch'. In the first three decades of Sabah's political history in the Malaysian federation, the incumbent Sabah state government was tossed out on a regular basis by the voters. From 1963 to 1975, Sabah was ruled by the Sabah Alliance/USNO. In April 1976, Parti Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah (Berjaya or Sabah People's United Front) won the state elections and retained power until 1985. Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) won the April 1985 elections and stayed in power until 1994. Although [PBS won the February 1994](#) state elections narrowly, immediate defections from PBS to BN saw PBS toppled even before the first sitting of the Dewan Undangan Negeri (Sabah State Assembly).

In the 2004 and 2013 state elections, Sabah BN prevailed and it seemed the '10-year-itch' was finally over. The reasons are complicated: suffice to say, Sabah UMNO's Musa Aman dominance, BN's 'rotation system', and '[Project IC](#)' were able to suppress the itch.

Talking to ordinary people in Sabah, I get the sense that the itch is still here. But it's difficult to quantify the level of unhappiness. The Chinese in the urban areas appear to be the most unhappy and many are relieved that DAP (via PH) and Warisan have an electoral pact. Many are worried that they will be forced to choose between DAP and Warisan.

It's much harder to read the political pulse of the Kadazan Dusun and Muslim communities. What is clear is that the BN Kadazan Dusun parties, [UPKO, PBS and PBRs](#), sees Warisan as a real threat to their seats. Just this past week, they have come together in an electoral pact, something that has never happened before.

The GE14 polling day is going to be a momentous day in Sabah.