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A New Player in Sabah Politics

By Farish A. Noor

Synopsis

Malaysia continues to witness the emergence of new political parties in the public domain, further complicating its complex political landscape. The new Parti Warisan Sabah (Warisan) points to growing political awareness among the people of Sabah. They may be following in the footsteps of Sarawakians, who have been vocal in demanding more political autonomy for themselves.

Commentary

AFTER SUCCESSIVE federal elections in Malaysia, it has become commonplace for political observers – locals and foreigners alike – to speak of the states of Sabah and Sarawak as ‘vote banks’ for the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition that has been in power since the country’s formation. Time and again, the constituencies of Sabah and Sarawak have voted for BN or BN-friendly parties and candidates. This was demonstrated yet again at the state elections of Sarawak, where the opposition parties – including the DAP – were soundly beaten.

Recent developments in East Malaysia, however, also show that a growing sense of local identity politics is evident, and that increasingly both politicians and the voting public in the states of Sabah and Sarawak have grown more aware of the pivotal role that they play in the country’s overall political equation. At their last state elections, Sarawakians demonstrated strong support for their own local leaders who championed the interests of their home constituencies, and who demanded more say in the political and economic management of Sarawak’s land and natural resources.

Parti Warisan Sabah – Moving Away From “Malaya” Parties

Now in Sabah a new party has been launched, called the Parti Warisan Sabah (Warisan), led by former UMNO Vice President Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal. Declaring that Warisan will be a truly local Sabahan multi-ethnic party that speaks for the people of Sabah, Warisan's emergence is an important development that tells something about the state of Federal-State relations in Malaysia today.

A cursory look at the leadership of Warisan shows that all of its main leaders are Sabah politicians who have been present on the local political scene for some time: Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal has been declared the party President, with Darrel Leiking as its Deputy President. Warisan's vice-presidents are Junz Wong, Jaujan Sambakong and Peter Anthony; while its secretary-general is Loretto Padua.

From the outset, several important observations can be made: Shafie Apdal was himself a member of the UMNO party, while all the other leaders of Warisan have also come from other parties such as PKR and DAP. That these Sabah politicians have decided to leave the 'mainstream' national parties and opted for a local Sabah party is indicative of a trend that can be dated back to the last federal elections in the country, when opposition parties in Sabah rallied around the slogan of 'Sabah for Sabahans' (that was also the clarion call for Sarawakians.) During the last federal election campaign in Sabah, many local Sabah politicians noted that 'West Malaysian' parties such as PKR and DAP were entering Sabah and tapping support from the local parties there. These parties were sometimes referred to as 'Malayan' parties, and regarded by some as interlopers encroaching on Sabah's political terrain.

That key leaders from both BN and opposition parties have left their respective parties to help create this new Sabah party is indicative of the growth of local Sabah-centric political awareness among the present generation of Sabah citizens; and is also a reflection of their desire to direct Sabah's future political and economic development on their own terms.

Secondly, as suggested by the Warisan logo – which features two hands shaking together – the formation of Warisan has managed to bridge the long and old cultural-geographical gulf between the inland, uphill communities of Sabah (the Kadazandusun and Muruts) and the coastal communities (the Bajao, Suluks, Malays and others). Up to the last elections, Sabah's politics has been characterised by parties that represent communitarian interests of specific ethnic-linguistic groups, that have remained distinct from one another. It has hitherto proven relatively difficult to bring together the collective demands and interests of the inland Kadazandusuns and Muruts, along with the coast-based Bajaos and Suluks. Warisan's leader Shafie Apdal has now made it clear that this inland-coastal divided has to be bridged, and the aim of the party is to unite the various communities of Sabah together.

Following the Sarawak model?

Some political commentators have speculated that Malaysia may witness an election in the first half of next year, which gives the Warisan party just enough time to begin its own recruitment drive and prepare for the campaign, should it materialise.

If Sarawak's recent state election serves as a benchmark, the emergence of a party like Warisan would have important implications for Sabah's internal politics and the emerging political landscape. Should local Sabah-centric political activism grow, and meet a receptive local audience, there is the very real possibility that other opposition parties – notably the PKR and DAP – will find their advances checked in Sabah, as happened in Sarawak recently.

Furthermore for the people of Sabah themselves the bridging of the coastal-inland gap may well bring about a new sense of state identity politics that has so far been missing in the state. Sabahans may seek leverage with this newfound sense of local solidarity in the way that Sarawakians have been able to get a better deal for themselves in their relations with the federal government. This does not necessarily entail a weakening of the federal-state model in Malaysia, but signals an evolution in federal-state relations that are reflective of the new realities of Malaysian politics.

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