In terms of history, culture and demography, there was nothing in common between the peoples of the Malayan peninsula and Borneo, other than that all were once part of the British Empire. When Malaysia was established as the successor state to the peninsular Federation of Malaya in 1963, Sabah and Sarawak (which together comprise East Malaysia) were included to ensure that the total bumiputera population of the new federation would be numerically superior to that of non-bumiputera. This chapter reviews political developments in Sabah and Sarawak since independence and argues that the common theme since independence has been an attempt to export the Barisan Nasional (BN)/United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) model of government to East Malaysia. The model is essentially based on a Muslim-led coalition government with Ketuanan Melayu (Malay Supremacy), and in more recent times, Ketuanan Islam (Muslim Supremacy), as its ideological core. After half a century of independence in the Malaysian federation, the indigenous non-Muslim bumiputera in both Sabah and Sarawak, who led their respective states at the time of independence, are politically marginalised, with little hope of getting back into power.

Sabah

The key political players in Sabah are the Muslim bumiputera, non-Muslim bumiputera (read Kadazandusun Murut, KDM) and Chinese community. The key to understanding Sabah politics is its changing demography. From 1970–2010, Sabah’s population increased by 390 percent, making Sabah a Muslim-majority state by the early 1990s. This growth has completely changed the dynamics of Sabah politics.

The ten-year curse era

Locals often refer to the first three decades of Sabah politics as the ‘ten-year curse’ era. This moniker refers to a change in government in every decade.

From 1963–75, two men dominated Sabah politics: Mustapha Harun and Donald Stephens. Stephens, a Roman Catholic, represented the KDM, the largest indigenous group in Sabah, while Mustapha represented the Muslims. When the Sabah Alliance formed the first
post-independence state government, Stephens became chief minister and Mustapha became governor. Their political differences paralysed the state government and in 1965 the federal government intervened directly by appointing Stephens the federal minister for Sabah affairs, completely removing him from the state to Kuala Lumpur. Peter Lo was appointed interim chief minister until 1967, when Mustapha became chief minister. To ensure federal dominance of Sabah affairs, the federal government sent Syed Kechik, a peninsular Malay businessman with strong UMNO connections, to ‘assist’ Mustapha. Although Syed Kechik held no political post, he often ran the state when Mustapha was away (Ross-Larson 1976). Mustapha spent long periods overseas, often gambling (Hunter 1976).

This state of affairs lasted until 1975, when the federal government became increasingly alarmed by reports that Mustapha was contemplating Sabah’s secession from the federation. Within a week a new political party, Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah (Berjaya), had been established with federal help. Stephens was appointed party leader. In the April 1976 state election, Mustapha was decisively defeated and Stephens became the chief minister. Unfortunately, Stephens died in a plane crash a week later and Harris Salleh took his place (Raffaele 1986; Lim 2008).

Harris Salleh and his Berjaya government ruled Sabah from 1976 until 1985. In 1985, Joseph Pairin Kitingan, the huguan siou (paramount chief) of the KDM, formed Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS or Sabah United Party). The KDM community were increasingly unhappy with the Harris Salleh state government. Salleh was accused of being ‘too federal’, especially when he transferred the sovereignty of Labuan Island, a small island off the west coast of Sabah, to Kuala Lumpur. Harris was also accused of trying to convert the KDM community to Islam and pursuing a policy of forced Islamisation, breaching a guarantee enshrined in the Twenty Points, constitutional safeguards under which Sabah and Sarawak agreed to join Malaysia in 1963, that all religions in Sabah would be protected. He was also accused of discriminating against non-Muslim Sabahans in the civil service and working with the federal government to increase the Muslim population by way of Muslim migrants from Indonesia and the Southern Philippines.

In 1985, Harris Salleh called for a snap election, hoping to defeat the newly established PBS. To the surprise of many, PBS won twenty-five of the forty-eight seats in the state assembly. Immediately after PBS took power, a series of explosions rocked Kota Kinabalu, Sabah’s capital. Muslim elements purportedly wanted to create chaos so that emergency rule could be imposed and PBS could be replaced by a Muslim-led government. At the same time, Kuala Lumpur was pressuring Pairin to form a ‘unity government’ with Muslim parties. Pairin, a Roman Catholic, refused and instead called a snap election in May 1986. This time the PBS increased its majority in the state assembly to thirty-five seats. Mahathir had little choice but to accept the new PBS administration, at least for the time being. Mahathir even allowed PBS to join the BN (Kahin 1992).

The tense relationship between the Muslim UMNO-led federal government and the Christian PBS-led state government was to fracture on the eve of the 1990 parliamentary election. A few days before polling, Pairin announced that PBS would leave the BN coalition and support Tengku Razaleh Hamzah, Mahathir’s political arch-rival. PBS said Razaleh promised to review the Twenty Points if he should win the election. Unfortunately for PBS and Razaleh, Mahathir’s BN easily won the parliamentary election. Mahathir immediately announced that UMNO and other BN parties (hitherto confined to the peninsula) would move into Sabah to challenge PBS (Chin 1999). Jeffrey Kitingan, Pairin’s younger brother and his political adviser, was detained under the Internal Security Act. In the 1994 Sabah state election, Kuala Lumpur mobilised all its massive resources to ensure a BN victory, but PBS
Exporting the BN/UMNO model

won narrowly. PBS took twenty-five seats to BN’s twenty-three. Before the state assembly could hold its first sitting, PBS had lost its slim majority when a dozen newly elected PBS Assemblmen defected to BN. The ‘ten-year curse’ persists, as PBS was in power from 1985–94 (Chin 1994).

Breaking the spell, 1994–2003

In the decade 1994–2003, Sabah was placed under what the BN called the ‘rotation system’: the post of chief minister rotated every two years among the three politically significant groups, the Christian KDM, the Muslim bumiputera and the Chinese (Table 7.1). UMNO calculated correctly that this provision was the easiest way to win support from the non-Muslims, for the time being. It is interesting to note that under the rotation system, the KDM was able to acquire the chief minister’s office only once, and KDM Chief Minister Bernard Dompok served for only ten months, whereas both the Muslim and the Chinese communities were able to serve out their two-year terms. In 2002, after twelve years in opposition, PBS was readmitted into the BN, signalling its total capitulation. Pairin was made a deputy chief minister, but he had little or no power in the state administration. The Muslim-led UMNO state government was clearly in control.

Project IC and Muslim hegemony

On 27 March 2003, Musa Aman from UMNO was sworn in as Sabah’s thirteenth chief minister. A year later, the rotation system was scrapped, apparently because, according to UMNO, Sabah was ‘ungovernable’ with the chief ministership changing every two years (Malaysiakini 2004). UMNO’s Musa Aman has been in power since and the ten-year curse appears to have been finally broken by UMNO. As of 2014, BN has been in power for twenty years.

It is clear that opposition among the non-Muslims, especially the KDM community, to the scrapping of the rotation system will not make much of a difference, given the reality of electoral politics. By the late 1990s, Sabah’s population and electoral system had dramatically changed, from a non-Muslim majority state to a Muslim-majority one. This process was effected via ‘Project IC’. The origins and rationale for Project IC were simple. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the PBS-led KDM community caused political problems by challenging the Muslim-led UMNO federal government. By increasing the number of Muslims in Sabah, Kuala Lumpur could permanently alter the voting balance in the state. The Muslim population was allegedly increased by issuing Malaysian identity cards (ICs – hence the name,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of chief minister</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sakaran Dandai, Salleh Said Keruak</td>
<td>March 17, 1994  May 28, 1996</td>
<td>BN–UMNO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yong Teck Lee</td>
<td>May 28, 1996  May 28, 1998</td>
<td>BN–SAPP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osu Sukam</td>
<td>March 14, 1999 March 27, 2001</td>
<td>BN–UMNO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chong Kah Kiat</td>
<td>March 27, 2001 March 27, 2003</td>
<td>BN–LDP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Sabah Government website.
‘Project IC’) to illegal Muslim migrants from the Southern Philippines and Indonesia Borneo. This process only could have been done by the federal government, since citizenship is a federal matter. A Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) in 2013–14 heard evidence of staff members in the National Registration Department in the federal Ministry of Home Affairs – directly under the control of then Prime Minister Mahathir, who was concurrently Home Minister – issuing Malaysian ICs to entire villages of illegal migrants. A special ‘task-force’ was even established to issue these ICs to Muslims (Sario 2013). One witness, a civil servant who took part in the operation, bluntly told the RCI he saw it as his duty to ensure Muslim dominance (Murib 2013). A doctoral study in 2003 confirmed that there had been a systematic attempt to increase the number of Muslims in Sabah using migrants from the Southern Philippines and Indonesia (Sadiq 2003).

The net effect of these instant Sabahans has been a dramatic shift in electoral power among the three political groupings (Table 7.2). In 1976, before ‘Project IC’, there were only eighteen Muslim-majority seats (37.5 percent). In 2008, this share had gone up to thirty-six seats, or 60 percent of all state seats. This meant that if all the Muslims in Sabah supported UMNO, the party could win outright. In three decades, Muslims have become an absolute majority in terms of electoral politics. The Chinese, on the other hand, have seen their share of seats drop by about 7–10 percent. The KDM have suffered the most, as they saw their representation plunge from 45.8 percent of state seats to a mere 21.6 percent (Chin 2012). It is clear that Project IC was an unqualified success in eliminating the political threat from the KDM, or any non-Muslim grouping. Ketuanan Islam became an electoral reality.

**Sarawak**

Unlike Sabah politics, politics in Sarawak has been remarkably stable for over forty years. Essentially the state has been ruled by a single Melanau-Muslim family since 1970. In fact, the longest-serving chief minister in Malaysia is Taib Mahmud, Sarawak’s chief minister for the past thirty-three years (1981–2014). He is easily Malaysia’s most powerful state politician and probably the richest as well. The key political players in Sarawak are the Melanau-Muslim, the mainly Christian indigenous Dayak (Iban) and the Chinese community. Both the Melanau-Muslim and the Dayak are officially classified as *bumiputera*.

---

**Table 7.2 Sabah: state constituencies by main voting groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1976</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NMB*KDM</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>−24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>+22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>−6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed b</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>+0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>48</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>60</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Notes:*

* NMB = Non-Muslim *bumiputera*.

* Mixed = Where no single ethnic group constitutes more than 50 percent of the voters.*
The Iban era

From 1963–70, both of Sarawak’s chief ministers were Iban Christians. In 1966, the Sarawak Alliance government under Stephen Kalong Ningkan, from the Sarawak National Party (SNAP), fell as a direct result of federal government intervention. Ningkan had earlier ignored local Muslim political opposition over new legislation that would permit non-natives (read, Chinese) to buy land. Kuala Lumpur was sympathetic to these objections, as it wanted a Muslim-led state government. It was, moreover, unhappy with Ningkan over his strict interpretation of the Twenty Points in refusing to use the Malay national language and his not promoting more natives to replace expatriates in the civil service.

In May 1966, Ningkan’s opponents had enough votes in the Council Negri (Sarawak legislative assembly) to unseat the chief minister. Kuala Lumpur then demanded Ningkan’s resignation, citing his minority support in the Council Negri. Ningkan refused to resign and the federal government dispatched the federal minister of Home Affairs, the inspector general of police (IGP) and the federal attorney-general to convince the Sarawak governor to use his reserve powers to dismiss Ningkan and appoint a weak Iban politician, Tawi Sli, as chief minister. Instead of accepting his ‘dismissal’, Ningkan sought redress through the High Court, which found that he had been unconstitutionally replaced; the Court ruled that the governor did not have the power to remove a sitting chief minister until a proper no-confidence motion had been passed in the Council Negri.

Before Ningkan could be reinstated, Kuala Lumpur declared a state of emergency in Sarawak and amended the federal and Sarawak constitutions. The amendment gave the governor the power to call for a special sitting of the Council Negri; one was quickly convened and a vote of no confidence was passed, thus legally ending Ningkan’s tenure as chief minister. Tawi Sli was reappointed chief minister, but real power lay with two Melanau-Muslim politicians with strong UMNO connections, Abdul Rahman Yakub and his nephew, Abdul Taib Mahmud from Parti Bumiputera. Rahman Yakub was the federal minister of education while Taib Mahmud was a state minister (Leigh 1973: 106).

The Melanau-Muslim era

After the July 1970 general elections, it was clear that no single party had a working majority; the Muslim-dominated Parti Bumiputera had twelve seats; the opposition Iban-based SNAP and Chinese-based SUPP also had twelve seats each; while the Iban-based Pesaka party had eight. Twenty-five seats in the forty-eight-seat Council Negri were needed to form a simple majority, so a coalition government was inevitable. Although SNAP and SUPP were much more compatible in terms of political outlook, SUPP decided to form a coalition government with Parti Bumiputera. The then deputy prime minister of Malaysia, Abdul Razak, made it clear that the federal government would not lift the state of emergency in Sarawak unless Parti Bumiputera were part of the state government. Parti Bumiputera’s leader, Abdul Rahman Yakub, was a Melanau-Muslim. Rahman Yakub was to serve as chief minister from 1970 until 1981. Taib Mahmud, his nephew and hand-picked successor, then took over as chief minister (Chin U.H. 1996).

In 1987, the Iban-led Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS) tried to get rid of Taib Mahmud. It had the support Abdul Rahman Yakub, who turned against his nephew in a squabble over control of Sarawak’s natural resources. PBDS, formed by a breakaway group from SNAP, claimed that it had majority support in the Council Negri and asked Taib to resign. Instead, Taib dissolved the Council Negri and called a snap election. In the campaign, PBDS claimed
James Chin
to be fighting for Dayakism and said it was time for an Iban to be a ‘general’ again, that is, to hold the chief minister’s post. While there was strong Dayak support for PBDS, Muslim and Chinese voters decided to back Taib and he won the state elections narrowly. The Sarawak BN won twenty-eight out of forty-eight seats, then later received another eight assemblymen who defected from PBDS. PBDS remained in the opposition until it was readmitted into Sarawak BN in 1994 (J. Chin 1996).

The rise of Taib Mahmud

Since the Dayak-led 1987 putsch, the Dayak polity has been deliberately fractured to weaken it politically. In 2002, a SNAP breakaway group established the Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP). Earlier in 2001, a power struggle had broken out in PBDS. Two years later, in 2003, the factions held separate party elections, resulting in PBDS’s having two of everything, from two party presidents to two supreme councils. On 5 December 2003, PBDS was deregistered. One faction registered a new political party, Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS) (Chin 2004). Less than a decade later, in 2012, a power struggle in PRS led to the launch of a new political party, Sarawak Workers Party (SWP). All these parties – SNAP, PBDS, SPDP, PRS and SWP – seek to represent the Dayak community. With so many different parties seeking to represent them, Dayak political unity is impossible. Thus, mounting a challenge against the Melanau-Muslim government is almost impossible.

Besides political divisions in the Dayak community, there are three other key reasons why Taib has been able to maintain tight control over Sarawak: his massive wealth, his keeping UMNO out of Sarawak politics and consolidation of the Muslim vote.

Sarawak Report (www.sarawakreport.com), a website run out of London by journalist Clare Rewcastle Brown, a British investigative journalist, started in 2010 with the sole aim of exposing Taib Mahmud’s corruption. Using documents from the Sarawak Land and Survey Department, Companies Commission of Malaysia and international NGOs, it has exposed massive land grabs by Taib’s family and his family’s extensive property holdings overseas. These properties, easily worth more than a billion dollars, are found in the US, Canada, Australia and the UK. In Sarawak, Taib’s family are the majority shareholders of Cahya Mata Sarawak (CMS), a leading conglomerate listed on the Malaysian stock exchange, Bursa Malaysia (Aeria 2002). A Swiss NGO estimates that Taib’s family is worth at least USD21 billion (BMF 2012). A court document filed by his daughter-in-law shows that just one of Taib’s sons is worth more than a billion ringgit (Jong 2013). Global Witness, an international NGO based in London, produced a video, ‘Inside Malaysia’s Shadow State’, which shows how Taib’s nieces tried to sell leases to plantation land worth millions to a foreign investor, openly declaring that ‘cousin Taib’ granted them the land’s lease. Another part of the video shows a Chinese business associate claiming that Taib receives a share of the proceeds from the sale of the lease.

Wealth notwithstanding, it is highly unlikely that Taib would have been able to rule Sarawak as his personal fiefdom if UMNO were in Sarawak. Early on in his rule, he managed to reach a written agreement with then Prime Minister Mahathir, who was also UMNO president, that UMNO will not enter Sarawak so long as either is in power (Chin 2004a). This has meant that UMNO’s key coalition partners in the peninsula, MCA and Gerakan, are absent from Sarawak, as well. Without UMNO, the Sarawak BN is highly autonomous. Taib’s PBB plays the role locally that UMNO plays in the federal BN.

As in Sabah, one of the ways to consolidate Muslim control in Sarawak has been to increase the percentage of Muslim-majority seats in the state (Table 7.3). In 1969, a year before the
Rahman Yakub/Taib Mahmud Melanau family took control, Muslim-majority seats accounted for a quarter of the Council Negri. By 2008, this share had increased to 38 percent. The major losers were the Dayak community, whose share of state seats declined by 18 percent. Taib has also made sure that his PBB party has always been in a position to take power alone. In the two most recent state elections (2006 and 2011), PBB won thirty-five seats and needed just one defector to form the state government on its own.

The rise of East Malaysia

The 2008 general election was a game-changer for East Malaysia. In the 2008 general election, the BN lost its two-thirds majority in the 222-seat Malaysian parliament for the first time in half a century. The BN won 140 seats, to the opposition Pakatan Rakyat’s 82. The same occurred in the 2013 general election. This time BN won 133 seats to Pakatan’s 89. But the really important number is the number of members of parliament (MPs) Sabah and Sarawak BN contributed to the BN’s national total.

East Malaysia provided fifty-five BN MPs in 2008 and forty-seven in 2013. In the 2013 general election, the BN margin of victory was twenty-one seats. Sarawak BN alone contributed twenty-five seats. In other words, without Sarawak BN, Najib and the federal BN would have lost power. In 2013, the forty-seven East Malaysian MPs made up 35 percent of all Barisan MPs. When Prime Minister Najib announced his post-election cabinet, more than twenty federal cabinet ministers and deputy ministers came from East Malaysia. The speaker of the Malaysian parliament and his two deputies were also from East Malaysia. Najib also declared an additional public holiday on 16 September as ‘Malaysia Day’, to commemorate the formation of Malaysia (Chin 2013). The rise of East Malaysia will have important implications for East Malaysian politics. With many Sabah and Sarawak MPs helming federal ministries, they will likely channel more federal development money to East Malaysia. More alarmingly, they will likely bring even more of the BN/UMNO style of politics to Sabah and Sarawak.

The BN/UMNO model

When the BN was established in 1973, it was clear that its aim was a government of national unity (Mauzy 1983). All parties, including all opposition parties, were invited to join the coalition. In fact, the leading opposition Islamic party, Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), joined the BN before it was expelled in 1977. Only DAP refused to join the BN. From 1981 onwards, the coalition underwent significant changes to its internal dynamics. Mahathir, the newly
elected UMNO president and prime minister, believed strongly in centralising power in the hands of the prime minister and UMNO (Hwang 2003). UMNO became the lynchpin of the BN and, in practice, UMNO was BN and BN was UMNO. The other component parties did not have any real power at the federal level. The unwritten norm of BN is ‘Malay-first’ in all government policies. In the past decade, Ketuanan Islam has also become an all-encompassing norm in the highest levels of government.

In Sabah and Sarawak, the Malays are minorities. Malays constitute about 10 percent of Sabah’s population and about 20 percent in Sarawak. The BN/UMNO model was thus forced to compromise – in East Malaysia, it became a ‘Muslims-first’ model. UMNO was willing to accept a Muslim leader from East Malaysia, rather than insisting on a Malay leader. This was accepted easily because in the Malaysian constitution, a ‘Malay’ person is defined in cultural terms. Any person can be ‘Malay’ if he or she professes to be a Muslim, habitually speaks the Malay language, adheres to Malay customs and is domiciled in Malaysia or Singapore. Thus, although Taib is a Melanau in Sarawak, he can qualify as ‘Malay’. Although Musa Aman comes from a mixed Pashtun–Dusun background, he, too, can be constitutionally defined as ‘Malay’ (Selvaraja 2012). Consequently, when one converts to Islam, the act is commonly referred to as masuk Melayu (becoming a Malay). This often means that the convert will have to ditch his or her cultural heritage and adopt Malay culture. Muslim converts can actually become ‘Malay’ in official documents and access the extensive government benefits given to the Malay community. It is a bureaucratic norm to register the children of Muslim converts as Malays at birth. One of the big fears among the KDM in Sabah and the Dayak in Sarawak is the loss of their cultural heritage as more and more indigenous peoples convert to Islam. This fear is not unfounded. In 2013, the mufti of Sabah, the highest Islamic official in the state, proposed a programme to ‘meMelayukan’ (make Malay) all indigenous Sabahans (Zurairi 2013).

The BN/UMNO model of always backing a Muslim as chief minister of both states means that the largely non-Muslim KDM and Dayak population are automatically shut out of the chief minister’s post, despite their status as the largest indigenous grouping in their respective states. It also means that the Christian population, made up largely of KDM and Dayak, are indirectly told that their Christian faith is a problem. This is best illustrated by the Kalimah Allah issue. In the 1980s, the federal government banned the use of the word ‘Allah’ and other Islamic terms by non-Muslims in Malaysia. Radical Islamic groups claimed that non-Muslims wanted to use the word ‘Allah’ to convert Muslims into Christians. In October 2013, the court of appeal ruled that the word ‘Allah’ is exclusive to Muslims in Malaysia. There was a strong reaction from the Christian community in East Malaysia because they have always used the word ‘Allah’ in their church service (conducted entirely in the local Dayak and Malay language). The KDM in Sabah and the Dayak in Sarawak are predominantly Christian. The issue of Ketuanan Islam will pose the major conflict between the Muslim and non-Muslim bumiputera of East Malaysia and Peninsular Malaysia in the coming years and will replace ethnicity as the main political divide in East Malaysia.

Conclusion

However little the peoples of peninsular Malaya and Borneo had in common in the colonial era, apart from British rule, Sabah and Sarawak experienced little ethnic or religious tension at the time. Since then, the UMNO-led federal government has intentionally tried to impose its BN-dominated framework, essentially an UMNO-led, Malay-first political system. This pattern can be seen in the direct federal intervention to ensure that the post of chief minister
Exporting the BN/UMNO model in both states has been held by Muslims. At the state level, Muslim leaders have worked to marginalise indigenous non-Muslim bumiputera. In Sabah, Project IC ensured that the largely Christian KDM lost their numerical majority. In Sarawak, the Dayak are hopelessly divided into a half-dozen political parties. The electoral system has also been used to ensure a Muslim majority in the state assembly. The Chinese community do not matter politically after fifty years of independence.

The largely non-indigenous KDM in Sabah and the Dayak in Sarawak are increasingly frustrated at their inability to stop or hinder the mirroring of UMNO-led BN power politics in East Malaysia. The KDM fought against the BN/UMNO model for most the 1980s and 1990s but they were defeated by ‘instant’ Sabahans. In neighbouring Sarawak, the Dayak tried in 1987, but failed, to unseat Taib Mahmud. Since then, they have been systematically divided into different political parties with little hope of coming together under a single party to mount a political challenge to the Muslims.

There is a sense that the non-Muslim indigenous peoples will never be able to assume political power under the BN/UMNO model. They are worried that Islam-first policies will lead to the destruction of their cultural heritage and divide the state along religious lines. The big fear among East Malaysians is that after half a century of federation, their entire socio-political environment is mirroring what is happening in Malaya. Prior to independence, East Malaysia had highly plural populations, with little or no religious tensions.

In reality, however, the boat has sailed. It is too late for the KDM and Dayak leadership to do anything substantial to slow the advance of Muslim hegemony in both states. The only difference between the domestic politics of Sabah and Sarawak is the presence of UMNO in Sabah politics. In Sarawak, it can be argued that while Taib has kept UMNO out, his style of kleptocracy is no better. Moreover, it is almost certain that UMNO will enter Sarawak now that Taib is retiring.

Change can happen only when BN/UMNO loses power at the federal level. Even then, there is no stopping the slow but steady march towards Islamisation of politics in Sabah and Sarawak.

Notes
1 Originally Brunei was to be included, but it pulled out at the last minute and only became independent in 1984.
2 He was later converted by Mustapha to Islam and became known as Muhammad Fuad Stephens. See Granville-Edge and Davadason 1999.
3 The main features of the ‘Twenty Points’ are:
   (a) Islam’s status as a national religion was not applicable to Sarawak and Sabah.
   (b) Immigration control was vested in the state governments of Sabah and Sarawak.
   (c) Borneanisation of the civil service should proceed as quickly as possible.
   (d) No amendments or modification of the safeguards granted under the Twenty Points could be made by the federal government without the agreement of the Sabah and Sarawak state governments.
   (e) There would be no right to secede from the federation.
   (f) The indigenous peoples of both Sarawak and Sabah will be equal to the Malay community in Malaya.
   (g) Sabah and Sarawak were to be given a high degree of autonomy over their financial affairs.
4 Mahathir’s involvement in the process led some to call the secret plan ‘Project M’ instead of ‘Project IC’.
James Chin

Bibliography


Chin, James (2004b) ‘The more things change, the more they remain the same’, in Chin Kin Wah and Daljit Singh (eds), South East Asian Affairs 2004, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.


Jong, Rita (2013) ‘Taib’s son has more than RM2 billion in various bank accounts, says ex-wife’, The Malaysian Insider, 2 September.


