

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF POLITICAL STABILITY IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT AGENDA IN MATUNGGONG, SABAH

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Abstract: Many suggests that the sub-district of Kudat which is also part of the Kota Marudu parliamentary constituency namely Matunggong in Sabah have been the area generally affected by poverty. Some even portrays Matunggong as an area in which the agenda of rural development have been slow paced due to numbers of factors. It includes political development there which characterises by the propensity of political leadership changes during elections because of conflicts or rampant competition between various political parties as well as rivalry within the party. Having said that, however, the linkage between political development and specifically political stability, and the slow paced of rural development in Matunggong, Sabah, Malaysia has never been discussed systematically through the lens of academic. By applying a qualitative approach through the examination of information gathered from various sources such as books, journals and media reports as well as interview with selected respondents, the paper presents a discussion on the the significance of political stability in rural development agenda in Matunggong of Sabah, Malaysia. The findings are expected to contribute in the systematic understanding of linkages between political stability and rural development agenda, thus provides fundamental information on the way the rural area should be developed by the development agencies and specifically the political leaders.

Keywords: Political Stability; Rural Development; Matunggong; Sabah; Malaysia

Introduction

The political development characterised by political stability of rural communities is interesting enough to be debated as it is the catalyst and determinant of success for any rural development agenda, especially in Malaysia. After all, scholars such as Awang Besar, Yusof, Ghazali, Ali, Yusuff, Nayan and Boyman (2020), Awang Besar (2021), Ong (2020), Oxford Analytica (2017), and Rahman (2018), portrays that rural areas in this country often contributed in the survival of the ruling party at both state and federal level. The significance of rural seats in ruling party's political survival became a stimulus and impetus for politicians to manipulate rural development agenda for their political interest (Ationg, 2017/8; Ationg, 2020). As a result, there are specific states in this country which still lagging behind in terms of development. Among the states that are still plagued by poverty due to slow paced of development activities includes Sabah, Sarawak and Kelantan. Of these states, Sabah generally hailed as Malaysia's poorest state (Geraldine, 19 September 2020; Yusof, 23 September 2020). Accordingly, Bolliger, Fabricius, Kamilles and Mogensen (2001), Lajiun (14 September 2018), and FMT Reporters (15 September 2021), portrays that though rural development has been part of national agenda since 1963, Sabah remain the poorest state in Malaysia. Though not necessarily true, Aisen and Veiga (2011), and Goldsmith (1987) argued that among the reason why progress of rural development in many areas around the world are slower has been the inability of a nation to maintain political stability or the propensity of a government or political party or leaders retain power due to the absence of conflicts or rampant competition between various political parties as well as leaders.

When we talk about political stability in the context of rural development in Malaysia, we need to acknowledge that political instability has far-reaching implications for development agenda. In fact, effort to ensure political does not occur is imperative. In explaining this, Murad and Alshyab (2019) through their study on the relationship between politics and economic development stressed that unlike political stability, political instability indeed have far-reaching implications for development agenda performance. They said, "the results point at a significant impact of political instability on the economic growth of the country in all the specifications considered; in particular, the analysis reveals a positive impact of external political instability indexed by border countries' political instability and a negative impact of internal political instability, as proxied by the number of crimes and cabinet changes". Based on this finding, one will surely wonder whether political stability affects rural development in Malaysia, especially in the small district of Matunggong in Sabah. Matunggong is part of Kota Marudu and Kudat districts where according to figure furnished by the national statistics department, 5 districts in Sabah recorded the highest poverty, led by Tongod (56.6 percent), Pitas (53.6 percent), Kota Marudu (46.1 percent), Beluran (45 percent), and Telupid (40.7 percent) (Geraldine, 19 September 2020). The data proves that east Malaysia state of Sabah is the poorest state in this country based on the 2019 Poverty Line Income (PGK) calculation methodology with a poverty rate of 19.5 percent, followed by Kelantan with a poverty rate of 12.4 percent and Sarawak with a 9.0 percent poverty rate. This paper seeks to analyse the significance of political stability in rural development agenda through the lens of state constituency or the small district of Matunggong in Sabah, Malaysia.

Approach to the Examination of Political Instability-Rural Development Relationship

The objective of this paper is to examine the significance of political stability in rural development agenda in the state constituency of Matunggong in Sabah, Malaysia. To do so, the study which the paper is based applies a qualitative approach through the examination of information gathered from various sources such as books, journals and media reports as well as interview with selected respondents from the state constituency of Matunggong in Sabah, Malaysia. In order to ensure that the obtained information represents the issues being studied or to ensure the construct validity of the information, all documents were verified by the third parties as accurate sources. Such move generally vital as it aims at detecting and correcting errors and inconsistencies in the data collected so that the information be cleaned to pass consistency and validation, a procedure that involve the removal of unverified data (Olteanu, Castillo, Diaz & Kiciman, 11 July 2019; Rahm & Do, 2000). Information or data cleaning is especially essential when dealing with information from multi-sources, in which it involves identifying and thereafter overlapping information or to match the records referring to the same real-world entity as well as substitution of incomplete data. This helps diminishes any orderly bias insights about the topic being conversed. This orderly bias might encompass the investigators own judgement toward the issue being studied. Thus, it is imperative to note that for the sake of ensuring the validity of the information gained, according to Kapoor, Tamil, Amani, Rana, Patil, Dwivedi and Nerur (2018), only the reliable information from several sources that are related with this paper. The reliable sources of information in this study denotes to sources that are more consistent than others which were free from the portion of bias towards other parties.

Political and Rural Development in Matunggong, Sabah

The examination of secondary sources such as books, journals and official government reports shows that Matunggong as the sub-district of Kudat as well as being part of the Kota Marudu parliamentary constituency is located halfway between Kudat district and Kota Marudu district (Ationg, 2001). While the distance between Matunggong and Kudat town is about 42 kilometres, the distance between this area and Kota Marudu town is 36 kilometres. The size of Matunggong is approximately 260 - 263 square kilometres (unofficial measurement) which is equivalent to the size of 181,760 acres or 72, 704 hectares (Majumah, Ationg, Esa, Muis, Othman, Mokhtar & Muda, 2021), covering the area starting from the small town of Sikuati up to Kampung Toporoi (one of the villages located in Matunggong). In terms of total population, as noted in the Gong Matunggong Festival Magazine in 2007, it was found that there are about 37, 987 people in this land. Of these, 85% are Rungus, Bajau/Ubian comprise 10%, Iranun 3% and the rest (2%) are other ethnicities such as Chinese and immigrants from Indonesia and Philippine (Majumah, 2015).

Moreover, according to primary sources been interviewed, as well as based on information from various types of publications, Matunggong was first recognised by the state government as the sub-district of Kudat on March 1, 1995. Such a decision was driven by the need for a coordination of development activities and administration of village community in this area. This led to the construction of several government offices there such as a small district office and limited number of shop lots. Since then, the small district office of Matunggong has become the implementing agent of government programs and projects to eradicate poverty,

modernize the living standards of rural communities and provide basic facilities and infrastructure in order to develop the community. The small district office of Matunggong remains committed in carrying out its duties and responsibilities to improve the social status of the community there. It is also appeared that Matunggong also has one State Assembly (DUN) constituency, namely N4-Matunggong and is part of the Parliamentary seat of P168 Kota Marudu. The N4-Matunggong was later amended to N5-Matunggong in 2020 Sabah State Election. Due to the change, the respondents who were interviewed opined that the change seems to have drown the history and sequence of events that have passed so long in N4-Matunggong, especially when discussion is focuses on elections ever held to elect a representative in this Constituency. Nevertheless, the political development of Matunggong still can be traced down for documentation.

Political development in Matunggong should be detailed before the formation of the federation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963. However, it is argued that focusing on political development there between 1963 and 2020 is immensely valuable. The reason is that, political activities among the people of Sabah generally based on democratic system within this period. Most importantly, it is appeared that historical record on political leadership in Matunggong only started in 1963. As shown in Table 1, information on which political party ever rule Matunggong is indeed available after 1963. Thus, examining political development in Matunggong within this period can be described as an appropriate decision.

Table 1: Ruling Party in Sabah and specifically in Matunggong

No.	The Ruling Political Party	Year in Power
1	USNO	1963 - 1976
2	BERJAYA	1976 - 1985
3	Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS)	1985 - 1994
4	Barisan Nasional (UMNO-MCA-MIC-PBS etc)	1994 - 2018
5	Warisan-Plus	2018 - 2020
6	Gabungan Rakyat Sabah	2020 - present

Table 1 shows that USNO was the first party to rule Sabah. It followed by the BERJAYA, Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) and UMNO-led BN (UMNO-MCA-MIC-PBS). The post UMNO-BN era saw the rise of Warisan-Plus, an alliance party which ruled Sabah between 2018 and 2020 for about two years, and thereafter replaced by the Sabah People's Coalition (GRS). That is, with the presence of many party dominating Sabah politics, the elected political leaders in Matunggong also undergone replacement. In 1963 election, USNO contested in 48 state constituencies and won 20 seats, a number of seats gained that similar United Pasok Momogun Kadazan Organization (UPKO) which also won 20 seats. Another eight (8) seats were won by the Sabah Chinese Association (SCA). In Matunggong, the winning candidate was Onduru Matakim of UPKO. USNO eventually formed the state government due to the support from the SCA. This made Onduru decided to switch allegiance from UPKO to USNO. Though USNO represented by a local leader, the people of Matunggong, especially the Rungus community felt uncomfortable with USNO-led government due to the implementation of a policy of converting indigenious into Muslim there. As the informer of the study in which this paper is based argued, USNO government entice the people of Matunggong with money and government position. Muslim students in government schools

were also prioritised over the others through the provision of government assistance such as books and other necessities. This in turn made USNO and Onduru collapsed in 1976 state election.

The 1976 election won by the newly formed party, the Parti Rakyat Jelata Sabah (BERJAYA), a party led by the late Tun Hj. Mohd. Fuad Stephens. Unfortunately, Tun Hj. Mohd. Fuad Stephens was killed along with five other leaders in the tragedy of a plane crash near Sembulan, Kota Kinabalu. Immediately after the incident, Datuk Harris Salleh was appointed Chief Minister. Under Harris, BERJAYA rule continued when it successfully retained numbers of seats during 1981 state election. In Matunggong, the BERJAYA elected leader during 1976 state election was Michael Wong. Nevertheless, his rule over Matunggong only lasted for one year when he was removed from office in 1977, paved the way for a by-election there on the same year. During the by-election, BERJAYA was represented by a Rungus leader, Amil Motinggi. He won the by-election uncontested following the Malaysian Election Commission decision to reject Michael Wong candidacy, but later, after 6 months, he resigned. In the second by-election, the same year, George Majunting who represented BERJAYA gained Matunggong seat. Unfortunately, George Majunting was suffering paralysis and this caused him failed in administering Matunggong effectively. The local informer who have been interviewed, pointed out that this situation is one of the contributors to the lack of development in Matunggong during the 3 years of George Majunting's rule.

This in turn made the voters realised George's inability to bring about development in Matunggong. For this reason, in 1979 state election, the BERJAYA candidate, Michael Wong manage to gain Matunggong constituency, defeated Matius Majihi of PASOK and Jamud of USNO. During his rule for the second time, Michale have brought significant development in Matunggong and particularly the Rungus community there. According to the informer of the study in which this paper is based, during Michale second time of rule in Matunggong, roads and bridges were built. Moreover, the basic damaged or dilapidated infrastructure were also repaired. Most importantly, housing projects were also held and this saw the construction of longhouses in the villages of Tinangol, Narandang, Lajong, Gombizau, Hobut and Tinutudan. Apart from that, the education system was also developed with the construction of schools and kindergartens in the Matunggonga. The construction of these longhouses, schools and kindergartens, roads and bridges were to some extent brought great changes to the Rungus community and the physical development of Matunggong. What this now hinted is that the elected leaders need to rule any constituency for at least two term to enable various development efforts be identified and implemented successfully. Therefore, relatively frequent changes of elected leaders which is a reflection of political instability likely to cause slow pace of development there.

Political instability characterised by frequent changes in the elected representative for Matunggong constituency also ignited by many factors. This includes the relationship between state and federal government. In explaining this, the informer of this study argued that federal government influence over Sabah politics has always been significance. He said, the collapse of USNO and the rise of BERJAYA which made the Yang Berhormat (Assemblyman) in Matunggong replaced true election was in line with federal leaders' desire to overthrow USNO when the relationship between federal leaders and Tun Mustapha of USNO was deteriorated. Scholars even suggested that political instability occurred due to

uneasy federal-state relationship also contributed in the slow paced of rural development in Sabah and specifically in Matunggong. Kok-Wah (1996), for example, stressed that deteriorated federal-state relations has been among the key contributing factor in Sabah political instability. This is especially true during Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) era.

Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) led by Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan took over the ruling power of Sabah in the aftermath of 1985 state election where the Matunggong constituency was also won by PBS candidate, Mathius Majihi. Mathius Majihi also won the constituency for the second time in 1990 state election. The victory not only enabled him to be awarded the title of Datuk by the Yang Di-pertua Negeri Sabah, but also allowed him to bring in more development project in Matunggong. In fact, development activities in the Matunggong went smoothly and comprehensively when it was under the rule of PBS through the leadership of Datuk Mathius Majihi. Construction and repair of roads, bridges, long houses, religious buildings, community halls, and many development projects were also taking place in Matunggong during his administration. The the most significant contribution of Mathius in Matunggong development have been the granting of Small or Sub-district status marked by the construction on Matunggong small district office and a row of shops in Pekan Baru Matunggong in the area near kampung Sumangkap. Apart from that, two secondary school were also acquired. This has been the key reason why many highly educated individuals emerged in Matunggong today (Bahauddin, Abdullah & Maliki, 2015).

Despite the contribution of PBS government and particularly Majihi in developing Matunggong, and won the 1994 state election with slim majority of 25 seats against Barisan Nasional's (BN) 23 seats, PBS overthrown by BN following the defections of some PBS members to BN (Ung, 1999). The collapse of PBS resulted in the introduction of the rotation of the chief ministership system. Accordingly, several leaders took turn to become a Chief Minister of Sabah. In Matunggong, however, the PBS leaders remain in power, especially after PBS re-joined BN, caused the development in Matunggong to undergo little improvement. In this regard, during this PBS-BN era, the way of life of the people of Matunggong also undergo little improvement from a life that focuses on planting paddy for subsistence use only to enterprises or commodity crops such as rubber and oil palm. At the same time, factories and rural enterprises such as handicraft, weaving, bead arrangement, virgin coconut oil, gong making, honey farming and tourism infrastructure were also emerged.

Despite that, however, BN failed to maintain grip over Sabah politics in 2018 election following the success of Warisan-plus to gain enough seats to rule Sabah. Although it was not as good as what the BN did, the Warisan-plus have also contributed in the development of Matunggong. This is especially true in the context of providing social and administrative services to the people there. The respondent of the study which this paper is based even suggested that despite only ruling for about two years, the leaders of Warisan-plus in Matunggong have managed to provide the services the people need. Nevertheless, the Warisan-plus have had to dissolve the state legislature to make room for elections in 2020. As a result, Warisan-plus overthrown by the Sabah People's Coalition (GRS). GRS remain in power up until today and is still making its effort to bring about development throughout Sabah. Like other elected leaders, even though it is still not obvious due the emergence of Covid-19 pandemic, the present elected leader from PBS is arguably trying her best to bring about development in this land.

It thus portrays that coinciding with the political development in Matunggong, it appeared that political stability has been the contributing factor to the development of the area. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that the relationship that exists between political stability and the development of a community in an area is seems significant. The implications of such a relationship can certainly be seen through the existence of various forms of development comprises of both physical and non-physical development. This is, among others, due to the fact that any elected leaders are required to play an effective and orderly role in bringing about development to the area in which they belong to. As Ationg (2020), Ationg (2018), and Esa, Ationg, Hiew, Abang Mohd Razif & Mohd Azri (2021) argued, leaders are a much-needed by the voters to bring about significance development agenda in the community.

Conclusion

Based on the discussion, it is by now clear that political instability has contributed in the slow paced of rural development activities in Matunggong, Sabah, Malaysia. This portrays that there is a significant linkage between political development characterises by political stability, and rural development agenda. For this reason, preventing political instability from happening requires political solutions characterises by unity and sustained good leadership. We are seeing an increase in political conflicts between politicians, causing ever larger and more profound political stability crises, prolonged government inability to focus on development agendas, and growing economic and financial issues in this country. Unless political leaders as a whole show the strong will to avert and end political crises, little will change for the rural communities who are caught up in this political instability. Political leaders must put empathy and courage at the heart of their shared decision-making. They must use all the power they have to prevent as well as end conflicts and find the most effective solutions. In this case, they required to put aside any kind of divisions to invest in peaceful, mature and inclusive societies. Moreover, apart from the present leaderships pool, Malaysia also in a dire need of more determined and bold leadership that always interested in setting aside differences from entrenched in political positions for political stability. In fact, it must be stressed here that leaders should use their positions to deliver better outcomes for the betterment of this country. It is hoped that with the growing numbers of good leaders, political stability will be re-created for paving the way of more inclusive development agenda in this country and particularly in the rural area of Sabah

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