



Ethnohistorical Analysis on the Resurgence of Multiracial Political Ideology through ‘Sabah for Sabahan’ Slogan in Sabah, Malaysia

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Abstract

Sabah has been a political battle ground to gain state power among multiracial parties since the state accorded self-rule in 1963. Though many suggest that early political parties such as UPKO and USNO were ethnic based, the reality showed that they promoted multiracial political ideology. The entry of UMNO in this state politics on February 22nd, 1991 which led to the fall of PBS government in 1994, a multiracial political party headed by Pairin of *Kadazandusun* community, however, gradually eased such political dogma. The political movement among the people of Sabah who can be categorised into three main ethnic groups namely Muslim *Bumiputra*, non-Muslim *Bumiputra* and Chinese eventually become more ethnic based. The politicians from each ethnic group were increasingly interested in gaining political support from their own ethnic group and that the *rakyat* also tend to support politicians of their own ethnic group. As a result, political activities in Sabah welded with ethnicity. Nevertheless, after more than a decade of grappling with strengthening ethnic divide, multiracial ideology is eventually resurging in Sabah due to the growing of interest among the people of Sabah, in particular the politician on the slogan of ‘Sabah for Sabahan’. This paper analyse how such slogan have contributed in the resurgence of multiracial political ideology in this land through the application of ethnohistorical approach that required the examination of various sources such as books, journals, newspapers, blogs and interview with key informants.

Keywords: *Multiracial; Political Ideology; Political Slogan; Ethnohistorical; Sabah for Sabahan*

Introduction

Sabah is a Malaysian territory with diverse ethnic population, as it comprised 42 officially recognized ethnic groups with more than 50 languages and not less than 80 dialects. Of these, 39 different ethnic groups are categorized as indigenous (also called natives or *Anak Negeri*) which make up about 2,203,500 or 60% of Sabah’s population of 3,736,600 in 2016 (IWGIA, 2016, p. 273). The IWGIA also reported that along with the indigenous ethnic groups, three different ethnic groups categorized as non-indigenous also live there and make up about 1,533,100 or 40% of its population in 2016. While the main indigenous ethnic groups are *Kadazandusun*, *Bajau* and *Melayu-Brunei*, the main non-indigenous ethnic groups are Chinese and others (generally referring to Indonesian and Filipinos) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2015).

Barlocco observed that these ethnic labels did not exist in Sabah “before the establishment of outside control over the area” (2014, p. 35). The reason is that the people of Sabah described by Mohamad (1977) as ‘the original people’ or the ‘early inhabitants of Sabah’ have never evolved any significant unit greater than *kampong* (village) due their small population size of between 50 and 100 only and that they usually consisted of relatives (Barlocco, 2014; Boulanger, 2009; Luping, 1985). Thus, ethnic label was not important because they were keen in maintaining strong family ties and lives harmoniously together rather than differentiating themselves (Boulanger, 2009; Robinson, Karlin & Stiles, 2013; Tarmudi, Saibin, Naharu & Tamsin, 2014).

The arrival of Islam through Muslim immigrants from Sulawesi, Indonesia in Sabah in late 15th century that led to the establishment of an external rule called Brunei Sultanate by the early sixteenth century, however, brought changes. The Brunei Sultanate in its effort to centralize control of administration introduced ethnic labels for Islamized and non-Muslim indigenous, thus made



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ethnicity began to characterize the social life of indigenous population in Sabah. The Brunei Sultanate introduced the term *Melayu* (Malay) for indigenous people who had embraced Islam and Muslim immigrants as the term became synonymous with the word Islam or Muslim (Luping, 1985). Nevertheless, many Islamized indigenous prefer to call themselves *Brunei-Malay* (*Melayu-Brunei*, Muslim indigenous who lives in the West Coast of North Borneo) or *Orang Sungai* (Muslim indigenous who lives along the rivers in the east of Borneo) to keep their culture, traditions and language alive through the maintenance of close ties with members of their traditional communities (Ali, 2010). In this regard, the Islamized indigenous believe that calling themselves as such rather than as *Melayu* can contribute in the maintenance of their close relationship with traditional communities because Malay was a term for those who lived in Malaya only and not for indigenous people in Sabah (IWGIA, 2016). Such attitude also affected Muslim immigrants from neighboring countries such as Philippines and Indonesia as they preferred to call themselves as *Suluk*, *Sama-Bajau* and *Illanun* but not as Malays (Nimo, 1968; Waren, 1983; Waren 1981; Harisson, 1975).

While most Islamized indigenous and Muslim immigrants have rejected Malay as their ethnic label, Sultan of Brunei also had introduced a broad social identification for non-Muslim indigenous peoples called *Dusun* (traditionally farmers) to differentiate the Islamized indigenous and non-Muslim indigenous. The word *Dusun* is a Malay word referring to farm and orchard. The term *Dusun* here, thus was used by Brunei Sultanate to describe the indigenous farmers who grew both wet and hill paddy (rice) (Glyn-Jones, 1953; Luping, 1985, p. 6). This early social identification comprised what Sultan of Brunei described as *Suku*²⁶ *Bisaya, Bonggi, Bundu, Dumpas, Gana, Garo, Idaan, Kimaragang, Kolobuan, Kujiau, Labuk, Linkabau, Liwan, Lotud, Lun Bawang, Dayeh, Makiang, Malapi, Mangkaak/Kunatong, Minokok, Murut, Ngabai, Paitan, Pingas, Rumanau, Rungus, Sonobu, Sinorupu, Sonsogon, Sukang, Sungai, Tagahas, Tatana, Tangara, Tidong, Tindal, Tobilung, Tolinting, Tombonuo, Tuhawon and Tutung* (Appell & Harrison, 1968). The Brunei Sultanate decision to introduce *Dusun* had led to the emergence of terms such as *Dusun, Melayu-Brunei, Orang Sungai, Melayu, Suluk, Sama-Bajau* and *Illanun*.

These social identifications during this period as described by Scott (2009) and Barlocco (2014), did not necessarily divided the people of Sabah during that period, as they saw one's ethnic label as not important. In fact, ethnic labels had resulted in the ambiguity of social label among the indigenous people of Sabah (Chee-Beng, 1997) as they identify themselves as *Melayu-Brunei, Orang Sungai* or *Malay* because they are Muslims. At the same time, they also often identify themselves as *Dusun* due to similarity in language, costume, music and songs, food and beverages, traditions during birth, marriages, death, and close family relations (Stephen, 2000). Most importantly, all ethnic labels during this period were informal and did not apply in any official matters. Ambiguity of ethnic label among the indigenous peoples continued even after the Brunei sultanate rule ended following Sultan Muhyiddin's decision to lease this region in 1977 to an Austrian trader, Gustavus von Overback in 1877 to overcome the problems of piracy by immigrants from Philippines (Many of whom were *Illanun* and *Suluk*) and the potential civil war. This phenomenon also persisted after Overback transferred the lease in 1881 to Alfred Dent Brothers, who immediately after acquiring the lease have formed the British North Borneo Company (BNBC) and named the region as North Borneo (The Times, 1927, November 24).

However, the transfer of ownership of North Borneo by the BNBC to the British colonial office in 1945 due to Japanese occupation in this region witnessed the establishment of proper social categorisation in this territory. Under its 'indirect rule' system of administration, the British began to establish 'proper social categories' in this territory which eventually become the North Borneo Crown Colony in 1946, described by Scott (2009) as a 'module of rule'. In this regard, the British decided to make the existing ethnic labels as legal ethnic categories for all official uses. The British also had decided to recognize the early immigrants of *Suluk, Sama-Bajau* and *Ilanun* as the

²⁶ The term *Suku* refers to social group of people characterized by commonality of language and *adat* (customary law).



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natives of North Borneo. Thus, the native population of North Borneo became known as *Dusuns*, *Brunei-Malays*, *Orang Sungais*, *Sama-Bajaus*, *Suluks* and *Ilanun*. The immigrants from China and other parts of the world who arrived after the establishment of colonial (British) rule in Borneo were identified by the British as Chinese and *lain-lain* (others) regardless of what dialect they spoke. Together, both Chinese and Others were categorized as non-native of North Borneo.

The decision of the British to identify the people of North Borneo based on ethnic labels and the larger social categorization of native and non-native, however, at this point did not necessarily divide the people of North Borneo. This arguably was because ethnic identities were free from political manipulation by politicians. This was the result of British policy of not encouraging the people of North Borneo from forming a political party. The governor of North Borneo even warned that the establishment of political party at this stage carried the danger of communal strife (Milne, 1965, p. 104). As a result, there was no single political party established in this region. This has prevented ethnicity from being manipulated by the politicians for their mileage. Regardless of their ethnic identifications, the people of Borneo lived harmoniously and they were also tendency among them to share *rumah panjang* (long house), gardens and playgrounds). For this reason, social scientists such as Tarmundi, Saibin, Naharu and Tamsin (2014), and Robinson, Karlin and Stiles (2013) described North Borneo as a ‘*multicultural paradise*’.

Nevertheless, ethnic differences began to assume importance there following the end of Sabah’s long insulation from party politics. It reared its ugly head when Tunku Abdul Rahman announced his proposal for political union between Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei to form the Federation of Malaysia on March 27th, 1961. Tunku’s aspiration had inclined aspirant Sabah leaders to play up the importance of ethnicity in their social life as a first step in forming communal political parties as in Malaya. Such effort began when the educated non-Muslim indigenous group led by Donald Stephens introduced an ethnic label called *Kadazan* to replace the *Dusun* for non-Muslim indigenous by early 1961. Their use of the word ‘Kadazan’, as Reid (1997) argues, was a reflection of their demand to be treated with as much respect as all other races in Sabah if Malaysia was to be established later where the non-Malays or the non-Muslims were treated as second class citizens by the Malay dominated government in Malaya, even if it was formed based on political collaboration among Malay and non-Malay elites. He said, “*educated Kadazans have come to regard the word ‘Dusun’ as derogatory when referred to them during the colonial days. Their use of Kadazans was their demand to be treated with as much respect as all the other races in Sabah*” (Reid, 1997, p. 127)²⁷. Such attitude and demand also affected leaders of other ethnic groups such as Datu Mustapha Datu Harun (non-Muslim indigenous), G.S. Sundang (non-Muslim indigenous from the interior), and Peter Chin and Khoo Siak Chiew (Chinese/non-indigenous). This was evident when five communal based main political party established by end of 1961 in Sabah namely United National Kadazan Organization (UNKO), United Sabah National Organization (USNO), United Pasok Momogun Organization (UPMO), Democratic Party (DP) and United Party (UP), all differed in their attitudes towards the proposed political union and ethnic groups each sought to represent (Yusoff, 1999, p. 3).

Since then, the political solidarity in this territory became more focused on what Tajfel and Turner (1979) calls ‘us’ versus ‘them’, a phenomenon where the citizens interested in isolating themselves from one another by aligning themselves with political parties led by one from their own ethnic group. Nevertheless, after more than a decade of grappling with strengthening ethnic divide,

²⁷ Although such attitude and demand also affected other non-Muslim indigenous, many in the interior were not interested in identifying themselves as *Kadazans* and preferred to call themselves as Dusun or just by their *suku*’s name (Stephen, 2000). Their refusal to identify themselves as *Kadazans* was mainly because they believed that such label was a British creation. They also believed that the label ‘Kadazans’ was applicable only to those non-Muslim indigenous living in the nearby areas such as Penampang and Papar because it was derived from the word ‘*Kakadazan*’ (towns) (Reid, 1997).



multiracial ideology is eventually resurging in Sabah. This was especially true when the political leaders in this state become more interested in using the slogan of “Sabah for Sabahan”, in particular after the sacked of Safie Afdal, a Key Minister and a Deputy Vice President of the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) on July 28, 2015. But how exactly the slogan of “Sabah for Sabah” has contributed in the resurgence of multiracial political ideology in this land? This paper analyse how the slogan of “Sabah for Sabahan” resurged the multiracial political ideology in Sabah.

Approach to the study on “Sabah for Sabahan” role in the Resurgence of Multiracial Political Ideology in Sabah

In examining how the slogan of “Sabah for Sabahan” have contributed in the resurgence of multiracial political ideology in Sabah, the study which this paper is based has employed an ethnohistorical approach to allow the use of history and ethnography concurrently in tracing such evolution. The decision to employ this approach is driven by the fact that it is always important not only to reconstruct the history of political activity in Sabah but also to show how present day people in Sabah live and express their political view. Moreover, this approach allows for the combination of key components of data collected during fieldwork in Sabah. The collection of both historical and ethnographic data was needed in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the research questions, taking into consideration the complexity of political development in this state. The reason is that combining different data collection techniques provides the opportunity to gain an increased insight (Husung, 2016; Sandelowski, 2000) into how the slogan of “Sabah for Sabahan” have played its role in the resurgence of multiracial political ideology in Sabah.

Accordingly, the application of ethnohistorical approach in analysing how the slogan of ‘Sabah for Sabahan’ have contributed in the resurgence of multiracial political ideology in Sabah required systematic analysis of various sources such as books, journals, newspapers, blogs and interview with key informants.

The ‘Sabah for Sabahans’ Slogan

The history of creation and the use of ‘Sabah for Sabahans’ slogan in Sabah’s politics is remain unclear. There is no indication of who exactly was the one who created such concept. However, according to the perception shared by most Sabahans, the slogan has been a popular political slogan in this land since even before the establishment of Malaysian Federation in 1963. Supporting this perception, the history of Sabah suggest that before Sabah could join the Federation, there had been strong skepticism among the state leaders on such proposal. Donald Stephens, in particular, was sceptical of Malaysia proposal in arguing that the formation of Malaysia was in fact a ploy by the Malayan leaders to colonize the Borneo territories. In his open letter to Tunku, Donald Stephens said, *“if we had been asked to join Malaysia at the time Malaya achieved independence and Britain made it possible for us, the story would have been different one. Now that Merdeka has been Malaya’s for some years, and we are still struggling towards it, Malaya’s proposal that we join as the 12th, 13, and 14th states savours of imperialism, of a drive to turn us into Malayan colonies... To join Malaya, while we are still colonies, and become Malayan colonies...the implication is to hand (ourselves) over to your (Malaya) control”* (Welman, 2011, p. 89; Kitingan, 2011, September 16).

Stephens also specifically expressed his concern about the possibility of North Borneo becoming a new colony of Malaya, saying, *“North Borneo is still not ready to join Malaysia and joining Malaysia means changing the status of North Borneo from a "British colony" to a "colony of Malaya".* Furthermore, Stephens emphatically asked Tunku to withdraw his intention to turn North Borneo into the 14th state of the Federation. He said, *“please do not pursue the idea of making Brunei the 12th state, Sarawak the 13th State and North Borneo the 14th State of the Federation. We are frankly not interested”* (Human Right Watch, 1991, p. 33). That is, with their concern about North Borneo becoming a new colony of Malaya, the non-Muslim leaders opposed the merger. Sundang as the leader of UPMO strongly believed that the Malaysia proposal was



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hasty, and proposed that North Borneo should achieve progress and independence on its own first before entering into any federation arrangement with any of its neighbors (Ongkili, 1989; Yusoff, 1999).

In dealing with the Sabah leaders' skepticism against the Malaysia proposal, the British and the Malayan government agreed and later incorporated the 20-point of agreement into the Malaysian Agreement²⁸ and the Federal Constitution on December 18th to 20th, 1962 (Kitingan, 1987). This agreement (also known as the '20 points') was submitted by five Sabah political parties, the United National Kadazan Organization (UNKO), United Sabah National Organization (USNO), United Party (UP), Democratic Party (DP), and the National Pasok Momogun Organization (Pasok). It was written by leaders of those parties to ensure that the interests, rights and autonomy of the people of Sabah would always be safeguarded after the formation of the Malaysian federation. In addition, it envisaged that Sabah be one of the four entities in the new federation (the others being Malaya, Singapore and Sarawak).

Despite the incorporation of the '20 point' into the Malaysian Constitution, Sabah's political autonomy as well as the rights and autonomy of the people of Sabah has been stripped systematically. The formation of Malaysia not only saw the downgrading of Sabah as among the 14 states, but the people of Sabah also marginalised economically. This is especially true following the implementation of affirmative policy in Sabah as admitted by the former Chief Minister of Sabah, Harris Salleh. He said: "more than 90 percent of those given the privileges of special allocations are Semenanjung (West Malaysia) Malays. Very few were allocated to Sabah and Sarawak Muslim *bumiputra*; none to non-Muslim *bumiputras*" (Opinion, 2010, June 13). This resulted in the growing of apprehension among the people of Sabah against the federal government. The apprehension expressed through the slogan of 'Sabah for Sabahan'. According to Kitab Fikir (July 8th, 2018)²⁹ the slogan is a manifestation of unhappiness among Sabahan against the federal government based in Putrajaya (Peninsular Malaysia) who feels that the federal government have stripped their rights as a Malaysian citizens, in particular the political rights.

Since then the slogan of 'Sabah for Sabahans' has become the key political slogan in Sabah, especially during the Sabah United Party (PBS, Parti Bersatu Sabah) era (Anti Fitnah Sabah, n.d)³⁰. Nevertheless, at this point, the use of the slogan was pertinent to the non-Muslim *bumiputra* community only. However, the sacked of Safie Afdal from UMNO on July 28, 2015 saw Sabahan regardless of their ethnic groups; especially the Muslim-*bumiputra* becomes interested in this political slogan. In explaining this, the FMT Reporters (May 7th, 2017) noted that, "the 'Sabah for Sabahan' slogan has been reported to have been used recently following a change in the political landscape that saw UMNO vice president and minister Safie Afdal leaving the party to form Parti Warisan Sabah).

Growing Importance of Multiethnic Political Ideology

The use of 'Sabah for Sabahan' created opportunity for the resurgence of multiracial political ideology in Sabah. The people of Sabah began to see unity among various ethnic groups in one political party as the political ideology best describe their interests as a whole within the larger Malaysian politics. The call by many to support Parti Warisan or the local party and urging the West Malaysia based party; in particular the UMNO to leave Sabah describes such development. This development thus set the stage for the decline in political support of UMNO and its alliance among the people of Sabah throughout the state.

The decision by Safie Afdal and Darrel Leiking to collaborate in forming the Parti Warisan Sabah has been regarded by the people of Sabah as a manifestation of political unity between the

²⁸ The Malaysian agreement signed on July 9th, 1963

²⁹ See Kitab Fikir (July, 8th, 2018). Cerita orang Sabah: Sabah for Sabahans. Available Online: <https://kitabfikir.wordpress.com/2018/07/08/cerita-orang-sabah-sabah-for-sabahan/>

³⁰ See Anti Fitnah Sabah (n.d). Slogan 'Sabah for Sabahan': Satu keramat yang tak sudah. Available Online: <http://www.fitnahsabah.com/2016/11/slogan-sabah-for-sabahan-suatu-keramat.html?m=1>



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Malay-Muslim and non-Muslims communities in Sabah. Such idea was eventually became one of the most discussed issues in Sabah. Most of the informants, and particularly the Malay-Muslim and the non-Muslim males usually acknowledged this situation. The personal experience of one of the Malay-Muslim male informants (48 years old) suggests the growing of interest among Sabahan in such idea. Based on his experience, he said that *“the political collaboration between Safie and Darrel as a means of unifying multiethnic Sabah is eventually become one of the most discussed issues because, like me, the rakyat in this state are unhappy with ethnic based party and therefore would want to express their disappointment with the UMNO-led state and federal governments by supporting the opposition (Warisan)”*.

While the informant expressed his disappointment with the UMNO-led government at both state and federal level, some informants even explained that UMNO need to leave Sabah and focusing on West Malaysia only. Such attitude very much described by the non-Muslim male informant (53 years old) of this study who argue that the people of Sabah really interested in taking UMNO away from Sabah. At the same time, he also stressed that the expansion of UMNO political influence in Sabah has been the key driving factor in the consolidation of activities pertaining to manipulation of ethnic divide among the politicians in this state. He said, *“the consolidation of activities pertaining to manipulation of ethnic divide among the politicians in this land has been the result of federal leaders’ move to establish UMNO branch in Sabah namely UMNO Sabah. Though the political leaders of UMNO-BN (Barisan Nasional) coalition described BN as a political coalition that have worked hard in developing Sabah and is not an ethnic based coalition, majority of Sabahan thought otherwise. This has driven them to support the newly formed multiracial political party, the Parti Warisan”*.

In light of the growing of interest among the people of Sabah to no longer supporting UMNO-BN but the Parti Warisan, the 14th General Election (GE 14) saw the fall of UMNO-BN in Sabah. The decline in the number of seats gained by UMNO-BN in GE14 as compared to number of seats won by the coalition in 13th General Election (GE 13) in Sabah described such phenomenon. In the GE13, the UMNO-BN gained bigger majority by winning 22 out of 25 parliamentary seats as well as winning 48 out of 60 state seats in Sabah. The opposition, however, gained 3 seat parliamentary seats and 12 state seats in this land. In contrast, during the GE14, the UMNO-BN coalition gained 10 out of 25 parliamentary seats and 29 of 60 state seats only due to the growing of Warisan political influence that based on multiracial ideology. The decline in the number of state seats gained by UMNO-BN in Sabah thereafter led to the sworn on a new Chief Minister of Sabah, Safie Apdal of Warisan.

When asked on the reason why they voted the Warisan and its coalition parties such as Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Democratic Action Party (DAP), the people of Sabah tend to argue that they keen in the idea of banishing UMNO, the ethnic and West Malaysia based party form Sabah. In explaining this, the non-Malay female informant (41 years ole) of this study said, *“like me, most Sabahan have voted Warisan – PKR – DAP coalition because we want to make sure that the UMNO will leave Sabah so that the state political power no longer under the control of federal leaders based in West Malaysia. Such move is crucial in the process of undermining the activities of politicizing ethnic divide among the UMNO-BN leaders in this state”*.

Such argument very much described how unhappy the people of Sabah with the activities of politicizing ethnic divide among the politicians and that they are becoming more interested in multiracial political ideology. Adding to such development, quickly after the fall of UMNO-BN in Sabah the new Chief Minister of Sabah, Safie Apdal urged the people of sabah to be committed to maintaining harmony. He said, *“we do not want ethnocentrism and racial culture to nest among the people of Sabah, thus affecting the relations between races. Sabah is made up of various ethnics and religions which are of course a unique and valuable treasure that needs to be kept for generations to come, so let us together keep the sensitivity and respect for the diversity of beliefs that exist in this state”* (Bernama, August 25th, 2018).



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Such call has been a call used by the Warisan throughout GE14, a call that attracted the voters in this land to rallies around one political party. In fact, in the led up of GE14, after close to a year at the helm of Parti Warisan, Safie convinced that he has won the support of the ethnic groups in Sabah. This was a phenomenon that did not occurred during UMNO-BN era. The last time the ethnic groups rallies around a political party was in the 1985 general election, when newly formed Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) led by Joseph Pairin Kitingan defeated BERJAYA (Shairi & SantoS, October 12th, 2017). While it is undeniable that activities of ethnic manipulation for political survival remain among the politicians, the rise of Warisan thus portrays the resurgence of multiethnic political ideology in Sabah.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed the resurgence of multiracial political ideology in Sabah due to the significance of a particular political slogan. It is argued that Sabah have been grappling with the grappling with strengthening ethnic divide due to political survival among the politicians at both federal and local levels. The political crisis in Sabah and at the federal level of government, in particular the political crisis in UMNO, however, have provided the local politicians to focus on Sabah politics, thus resulting in the use of political slogan which originally used by the early leaders in this land. The slogan, namely ‘Sabah for Sabah’ in turn ignited the interest among the people of Sabah across ethnicity to focus more on Sabah political rights and the Sabahan issues who feels that their rights as Malaysians has been stripped systematically.

As a result, they begun to feel a sense of togetherness and believed that they need to unite as one nation to stand up against the UMNO-led state government and the UMNO-led federal government. Such move has been the driving force that ignited the interests among the people of Sabah in describing themselves as Sabahan, thus made the multiracial political ideology is resurging. While it is undeniable that ethnic divide remain to have influence in Sabah’s politics, the people of Sabah increasingly understand the fact that politicizing ethnicity will led to what Nay (2013) and Patrick (2007) calls the “failed state’. For this reason, the growing interest in multiracial political ideology becomes inevitable in this state.

Considering that these phenomena are the result of the use of “Sabah for Sabahan’ slogan, it is argued that there is a solid link between the resurgence of multiracial political ideology and this slogan in Sabah. This suggests that the change of political nature in a society characterised by multiracial can be made through the creation of a political slogan which is strongly related to the needs of the people in the society.

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