The Lahad Datu Standoff and its Impact on the GE13 Results in Sabah

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Abstract
The so-called ‘Lahad Datu Standoff’ was a brief security crisis from early February 2013, when a group of several hundred rag-tag militiamen from Simunul and Tawi-Tawi islands in the neighboring southern Philippines who arrived by boats in Sabah and began occupying several villages. Proclaiming themselves as the ‘Royal Army of the Sulu Sultanate’, the gunmen represented the heirs of a long-defunct kingdom, which once controlled the territory until the late nineteenth century. The self-proclaimed Sultan of Sulu, Jamalul Kiram III, who was directing the militant incursion, insisted that Sabah was rightfully part of his kingdom. While engaging police in several firefight, the insurgents beheaded and mutilated several captured Malaysian security personnel, prompting Malaysian forces to deploy fighter jets in a successful operation to flush out the intruders. According to media reports, individuals in the highest levels of the Malaysian government were suspicious of a conspiracy, especially considering the highly unusual timing of the Sulu operation, which was so close to elections in both Malaysia and the Philippines. Najib Razak, the Malaysian Prime Minister, expressed concern that the Lahad Datu crisis would negatively affect the ongoing status of Sabah as a Barisan Nasional (BN) ‘fixed-deposit’ state for votes. Meanwhile, the opposition leaders had been increasingly successful in highlighting local issues such as marginalisation in national development initiatives, Sabah’s oil royalty, corruption among local UMNO leaders, illegal immigrants, dissatisfaction on federal-states relations and the integrity of election process. Nevertheless, despite the crisis in Lahad Datu and the success of opposition leaders in highlighting local issues, Sabah (and Sarawak) once again became the key determinants of who forms the majority in the Malaysian parliament. Specifically, BN won 22 of 25 parliamentary seats in Sabah (and 25 of 31 parliamentary seats in Sarawak). Analysing various sources such as books, journals, newspapers and blogs, this paper will argue that the Lahad Datu standoff was the Barisan Nasional’s ‘lifesaver’ in Sabah.

Keywords: Lahad Datu Standoff, GE13, Sabah.

Introduction
When the patriotism¹ was growing among the native people in Sabah ahead of GE13, challenging BN political formula to keep Sabah as its key electorate² to retain power, it’s not surprisingly produce waves of

¹ To strengthening state autonomy.

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fear in the BN camp, especially Mr. Najib Razak, the Prime Minister of Malaysia. The fear of losing Sabah as a key electorate or the so-called BN fixed deposit states for votes status was triggered by the increasingly success of the local opposition leaders such Jeffry Kitingan in highlighting his aim to fight for rights of Sabah (and Sarawak) in accordance to 20-point agreement and Malaysia Agreement (The Star 2010). As a veteran state politician, his political struggle centred on the local issues such as marginalisation in the areas of national development, Sabah’s oil royalty, corruption among local UMNO leaders, illegal immigrants, citizenship-for-votes scandal, dissatisfaction on federal-states relations and the integrity of election process.

Increased in the patriotism among native people in Sabah preceded by Jeffry Kitingan followed by the decision of the president of SAPP, Yong Teck Lee to pull out of BN in September 17, 2008 and become independent party (The Star 2008, AsiaOne news 2008, SAPP.org.my 2013). SAPP which is led by Yong Teck Lee has consistently blamed the Federal government over Sabah’s political development problems.

Also, in July 28, 2012, the Deputy Minister of Local Government and Housing, Lajim Ukin had decided to quit UMNO, followed by Deputy President of UPKO, Wilfred Bumburing who later joined Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), a west Malaysia-based political party led by Anwar Ibrahim/Dr. Wan Azzizah. After leaving BN, Lajim and Bumburing have kick started a state-wide tour in support of the federal opposition ahead of the 13th general elections. The influx of illegal immigrants into the eastern state and Putrajaya’s oversight on this issue were among the reasons those two ex-BN members withdrew from BN (Hornbill Unleashed 2012). As reported by Hornbill Unleashed (2012) Bumburing stressed that:

BN's policy towards illegal immigrants is very dangerous because of (illegal immigrants committing) crime, making it difficult for citizens to get job opportunities, and threatening national security and during Dr M’s (Mahathir) time, (there was a) policy to simply give identity cards to illegal immigrants to foreigners.

Bumburing also said that the situation is made worsen when:

More than 250,000 illegal immigrants come voting under the guise of being a Sabah native such as Kadazan, Dusun, Murut, Bajau and so on.

Together, all local opposition leaders formed a strong force in making sure that the people in Sabah are increasingly aware of their democratic rights as electorate and could only vote for leaders who are committed in fighting for the interests of their people. Most importantly, the leaders hoped that their efforts to increase people of Sabah’s desire to reject BN-UMNO in the GE13 would be successful. This is evidenced by the ‘Ini Kali lah! Tukar! Ubah’ [it’s time to change] slogans being widely used by the Sabahan. These slogans also carried the message that this is the time to topple the BN_UMNO government and replace them with Pakatan Rakyat (SabahKini.net 2013). These newly invented political slogans had even spread throughout west Malaysia due to its extensive used by Anwar Ibrahim in all his political campaign or ‘ceramah’.

As reported by SabahKini.net (2013), the Sabah DAP vice chairman, Edward Ewol Mujie, said:

The people have adopted this new slogan to replace the old saying of ‘Tukar Baju’ which was used in 1985 to topple the Berjaya government and replaced with Sabah United Party (Parti Bersatu Sabah [PBS]). Sadly, the ‘Baju’ had been changed many times but the same people after changing their shirts still remained in senior government position and holding power.

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2 The Malaysian Prime Minister, Hajib Razak described Sabah (and Sarawak) as the Barisan Nasional (BN) ‘fixed deposit’ for votes or the key determinants to retains its power

3 Referring to allegations where BN had granted citizenship to illegal immigrants in exchange for votes.
This political slogan represents the common feelings of people in Sabah which mean the calls of the Sabahan for new government or to change of government for betterment.

In light of the increasing success of local opposition leaders in highlighting local issues, several political analyst such as Clara (2012), Hornbill Unleashed (2013) and Azrul Azwar (gajahmenta.blogspot 2013) has predicted that Pakatan Rakyat coalition (PR) would gain victory in most of the parliamentary seats in Sabah which could put it within sight of a 122-seat simple majority in Malaysian Parliament.

Moreover, a public opinion poll carried out by Merdeka Centre\(^4\) in September 06-17\(^{th}\), 2012 found that voters’ satisfaction of Sabah Chief Minister Musa Aman, an UMNO-BN chief, in the state has taken a dive to below 50 % (Merdeka Centre 2012). The survey detected that the satisfaction of Sabah voters towards Musa, who has been head of the state for almost a decade, has dropped significantly from 60 % in November 2009 to 45 % in September 2012. The decline was recorded across all ethnic groups. The survey also found a drop in the economic sentiment among the voters, with more than half of the respondents (more than 57% from a total of 829 registered voters) expressed dissatisfaction with the economic development in Sabah. Similarly, voters’ satisfaction towards the state government recorded a 6% decline from 62 % in November 2009 (56 % in 2012).

The growing patriotism among the native peoples in Sabah led by the opposition leaders, however, an unstable arrangement because of the political goal differences between east Malaysia-based opposition political parties and west Malaysia-based opposition political parties. The east Malaysia-based political parties such as State Reform Party (STAR) and Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) characteristically sought opportunities to increase their own control in Sabah, which aimed to seize the so-called colonialisation by BN-UMNO in east Malaysia. The west Malaysia-based parties such as arti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS), on the other hand, were more interested in preserving political dominance throughout Malaysia. In this respect at least the east-based opposition political parties and west-based opposition political parties agenda can be said to have roughly coincided with the Pakatan Rakyat coalition’s objective to topple the BN-UMNO government. But within their own sphere, where it appeared that their political interests would be better by supporting Pakatan Rakyat agenda to topple BN-UMNO government, the east-based opposition political parties and west-based opposition political parties did not hesitate to do so.

The fear of losing the Sabah status as a key determinant of success for BN in winning the GE13, particularly Najib Razak, the Prime Minister of Malaysia were escalated when military crisis took place in Lahad Datu. As according to Joe (2013), Malaysia Kini (2013) and Kritis-online.com (2013), Najib Razak had expressed concern that the Lahad Datu crisis would negatively affect the ongoing status of Sabah as a Barisan Nasional (BN) ‘fixed-deposit’ state. The reason was that individuals in the highest levels of the Malaysian government (and Philippine) were suspicious of a conspiracy, especially considering the highly unusual timing of the Sulu operation, which was so close to elections in both Malaysia and the Philippines (nsnbc international 2013). The nsnbc international (2013) also has reported that the blame has been laid on Malaysia’s de-facto opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, whom Malaysian reports as having links to Filipino insurgent networks that have long eyed the resource-rich state of Sabah.

Therefore, inevitably, the growing patriotism among native Sabahan increased the BN-UMNO pressure on Sabah, and so offered fear of loss of power in GE13. But it was not entirely certain that growing patriotism among the native people in Sabah (and Sarawak) would paralyse BN to gain victory in GE13 if there was a

\(^4\) Merdeka Center is an opinion research firm established to concentrate the capabilities of a team of dedicated social scientists and professionals in the field of economics, political science, communications, marketing management and civil society. Merdeka Centre’s mission is to act as a bridge between Malaysians and the leading members of society, by collecting public opinion and expressing them through survey results, analysis and position papers.
‘lifesavers’. It was with this consideration that any issues or chaos in Sabah (or Sarawak) still can have a big impact on the result of GE13 in favour of BN.

Interestingly, the result of the recent Malaysian general election (GE13) shows that the BN has won 133 of 222 (60%) parliamentary seats or with a majority seat in the national parliament, while the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) won 89 (40%) parliamentary seats (Moniruzzaman 2013, p. 61, Aliran 2013). However, BN performed worse than the previous general election as it did not secure a two-third majority (Amer et al. 2011, p. 20, Maybank IB Research 2013) and having lost 7 seats to PR.

Despite losing the popular votes, Barisan Nasional still retained power in the GE13 due to its victory in almost all parliamentary seats in Sabah (and Sarawak), while in west Malaysia, BN failed to maintain its strong grip. The PR failed to loosen BN’s grip on Sabah (and Sarawak) when it secures 22 of 25 parliamentary seats, while in Sarawak BN secured 25 of 31 parliamentary seats. However, the opposition parties (Pakatan Rakyat) has increased electoral gains in Sabah (and Sarawak). Comparatively, in GE12, BN has won 140 parliamentary seats, while PR won 82 parliamentary seats (Amer et al. 2011, p. 20). In Sabah, BN won 24 out of the 25 parliamentary seats and in Sarawak 30 out of the 31 federal seats. Hence, in GE12 number of parliamentary seats won by BN in east Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) was 54 out of 56.

Based on this data, despite east Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) only having a quarter of the total 222 seats in Malaysian parliamentary seats, both states are contributing one-third of the 133 federal sets won by the BN. In east Malaysia, BN managed to win 47 (21%) of the federal seats. However, in west Malaysia (peninsula Malaysia) BN only managed to win 86 (39% out of 133) of the federal seats. This means, once again, east Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) have become the determinants or the kingmaker of who forms the majority in the Malaysian parliament as well as contributed to the success of BN to retain power (Aliran 2013). Most importantly, the data suggests that if the Pakatan Rakyat managed to secure most of the parliamentary seats in Sabah (and Sarawak) then BN would not be able to retain power.

Considering the increase in the patriotism among the native people in Sabah led by the opposition leaders as well as Pakatan Rakyat growing popularity and in Sabah, and the success of BN in retaining power in GE13, one should suspect that there is a factor that has significantly caused BN to again being elected as the ruling government. Specifically, one should suspect if the incident that took place in Sabah which led up to the GE13 became the ‘lifesaver’ of BN in Sabah, the kingmaker in GE13. With this in mind, this paper argues that the Lahad Datu standoff has become the Barisan Nasional’s ‘lifesaver’ in Sabah. This paper argues that due to the Lahad Datu armed crisis, the electorate in Sabah has voted in favour of BN in GE13.

In particular, this paper will be focusing on the impacts of Lahad Datu standoff towards the GE13 results in Sabah, by analysing various sources such as books, journals, newspapers and blogs. Thus the following sections will present a discussion on the Lahad Datu standoff and its impacts on the GE13 results in Sabah as well as its significant contribution to the success of BN in gaining victory in almost all parliamentary seats in Sabah to retain power.

The Lahad Datu Standoff

The so-called Lahad Datu standoff was a brief security crisis which began in February 09th, 2013 when 235 militants arrived by boats from Simunul and Tawi-Tawi island in southern Philippines in February 11th, 2013. This militant group proclaimed themselves as the “Royal Security Force of Sulu and North Borneo” which reported to have sent by Jamalul Kiram III, one of more than a dozen claimants to the throne of the Sultanate of Sulu and the person who declared the Sulu province as an independent state from the Philippines in November 2011. The gunmen represented the heirs of a long-defunct kingdom, which once controlled the territory up until the late nineteenth century. Specifically, this militant group claims that the
state of Sabah or North Borneo was once belonged to the Sultanate of Sulu who in fact had given the state to British East India Trading Company (BEITC)\(^5\).

However, as reported by Amir (Free Malaysian Today 2013) and Roel (The Phillipine Star 2013) the armed group wanted to turn the ‘invasion’ into international issues, specifically to draw attention to its plea for an independent Sulu sultanate. But the sultanate is financially not in a good shape and hence, the group turned its attention to Sabah where this group claimed that the Sultan Sulu has “rented out” the state to Malaysia. Jamalul Kiram III had consistently stated that Malaysian government is paying the Sultanate a sum of RM 5,300 (about USD 1,710 or PHP 70,000 [Philippine Pesos])\(^6\) yearly in exchange for agreeing to let Sabah become a Malaysian State, and he claimed that the payment is a rent. In fact Jamalul Kiram III wants to renegotiate for a higher payment to run the “government of Sulu”, but Malaysian government consistently rejected the existence of such rent. Thus, Jamalul Kiram III believed that invasion in Lahad Datu Sabah is the best way to force Malaysian government to renegotiate. He also believes that his people based in Sabah will provide assistance in his effort to negotiate. But, even before, any effort by the Philippine government to claim Sabah, as well as what was officially declared by Manila (Philippine government) in

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\(^5\) Historically, Philippine as well as the Sultanate of Sulu has been consistently claiming a part of Sabah as its territory based on the heritage of Sultanate of Sulu (Hernando 1966, p. 21, Nik Mahmud 2001, p. 11-18). From the late 17th century, North Borneo (or Sabah) and the island of Palawan (including Spratly Island), according to Kiram and some other people were bestowed as a gift to the Sultan of Sulu by the Sultan of Brunei in gratitude for the Sultan of Sulu military assistant to quell a rebellion (Borneo’s civil war in 1658). However, in “Tarsilah Brunei II: Zaman Kegemilangan dan Kemasyhuran” [Tarsilah Brunei II: Period of Splendour and Fame], Jamil Al-Sufri (2007) stated that, in fact, such a handover by the Sultanate of Brunei to Sultanate of Sulu never took place because the Sulu military force does not actually assisted Sultan of Brunei during Brunei Civil War. He argues that it is true that the Sulus were invited and promised the northern Brunei territory (North Borneo) by Sultan Muhyyiddin if they helped him win the civil war against Sultan Abdul Hakkul Mubin, the 13th sultan of Brunei. Sultan Muhyyiddin was the 14th sultan of Brunei who ruled from 1673 to 1690. He usurped the throne after killing Sultan Muhammad Ali, the son of Sultan Mubin, and later tried to stop Mubin from taking his revenge. In fact, Mubin appointed Muhyyiddin as Bendahara but later created chaos at the capital with his followers, forcing Mubin flee to Pulai Chermin. This gave Muhyyiddin the opportunity to appoint himself as new Sultan of Brunei. Based on their earlier agreement, the Sulu warrior supposed to attack the Chermin Island or Pulau Chermin (the place where Sultan Abdul Hakkul Mubin hiding and strengthening his military force to regain his throne), through Keingaran Island or from the sea, but the Sulu did not do so because they were terrified by the resistance of Sultan Abdul Hakkul Mubin’s forces in Pulau Chermin. The Sulu warriors went up to the island and took the chance to take a number of war booties only after Sultan Muhyyiddin won the battle. Later, Sultan Muhyyiddin refused to cede the territories promised to Sulu because of the failure of Sulu soldiers. Thus, the area was only “claimed” and not “ceded” to Sultanate of Sulu by the Sultanate of Brunei (Raffles 1830, p. 267, Saunders 2002, p. 87). Wright (1970, p. 142-172) in his book ‘The Origin of British Borneo’ also argue that the legitimacy of the Sulu claim to the territory is in considerable doubt partly because of the unreliability of ‘tarsilas’ such ‘selesilah’, which is in many cases are nothing more than written down legends to enhance the status of royal house which produced them. Moreover, Rutter (1922) also asserts that they was a treaty which Sultanate of Brunei had entered into with Great Britain in 1847 he had engaged to make no cession of any part of his dominions without obtaining the consent of the British government.

\(^6\) In 1878, the Sultanate of Sulu signed an agreement with Baron von Overbeck of British East India Trading Company (BEITC), allowing it to use Sabah. In return the Overbeck must pay an annual cession payment forever to the Sultanate of Sulu. However the agreement signed by sultanate of Sulu and Baron von Overbeck is questionable as well as Rutter (1922, p. 120) in his book ‘The British North Borneo’ also admitted that this matter was very complicated due to the issue of who has the right to cede North Borneo.
1962, would be unsuccessful because of the overwhelming evidence which can be found over a century in favour Sabah and Malaysia.

Moreover, some of the major newspaper in Malaysia and Philippine such as The Star (2013) and Philippine Daily Inquirer (2013) reported that due to the exclusion of Sultanate of Sulu in the terms of the ‘framework of a peace deal’ between the Philippine government and MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front), announced on October 07th, 2012, Jamalul Kiram III decreed that everyone should assert his territorial rights in North Borneo.

In the very beginning of the incident, Kiram III had appointed his brother, Agbimuddin Kiram (Raja Muda or Crown Prince), to lead a group of 235 militants to pursue his territorial claims on Sabah. The militiamen arrived in the village of Tanduo, Lahad Datu, Sabah from Simunul Island and Tawi-Tawi in southern Philippines. The incursion had led Malaysian police to block roads leading from Lahad Datu through palm oil plantations to the remote village of Tanduo, the village where the intruders occupied. Meanwhile the Philippine security agencies also blocked off entry from southern Philippine, and deployed six naval ships to the seas of Sulus and Tawi-Tawi to help stabilize the situation.

President Aquino, the President of Philippine, in February 26th, 2013, had appealed to Kiram to recall his followers and to hold dialogue with the government to address his family’s claim on Sabah, but Kiram refused. Also, Malaysian government had appealed to Kiram and his followers to retreat or surrender, but Kiram still refused, and said:

_The standoff is not over, unless there is a concrete agreement can be reached between Sultan, Philippine, and Malaysia._ (quoted in The Star 2013 and Philippine Daily Inquirer 2013)

Thus, on March 01, 2013, around 10.15AM, three days after Malaysia’s extended deadline for the group to leave Lahad Datu, a confrontation occurred between the militants and Malaysian police when the Kiram’s men opened fire. During the shots exchange 10 members of the militants were killed and two causalities from the Malaysian police.

On the same day, Najib Razak later confirmed that two police personnel died in the shootout, and he had given Malaysian security forces a mandate to take “any action” against the group. Najib also specifically stated that:

Kiram’s claim on Sabah is indeed resting on the treaty signed by Sultan Jamalul Alam of Sulu and British North Borneo Company. However, the treaty is questionable. If the North Borneo was never handed over by the Sultanate of Brunei to Sultanate of Sulu, then the treaty is invalid and a product of fraud on the part of Jamalul Alam. Hence, the self-proclaimed Sultan of Sulu, Sultan Jamalul Kiram III claims on Sabah is invalid as it is a product of fraud by Jamalul Alam. The first treaty was signed by Brunei’s 24th Sultan, Sultan Abdul Momin, which appointing Baron von Overbeck as the Rajah Gaya and Sandakan (Maharaja Sabah or the King of Sabah) on December 29th, 1877 (Saunders 2002, p. 87, Nik Mahmud 2001, p. 11-18). The second treaty was signed by Sultan Jamalul Alam, appointing Baron von Overbeck as Dato Bendahara and Rajah Sandakan on January 22nd, 1987 (Saunders 2002, p. 87, Nik Mahmud 2001, p. 11-18, Hernando 1966, p. 17), three weeks after the first treaty was signed. Moreover, the death of Sultan Jamalul Kiram II in June 7, 1936 saw no successor, since he died childless, which is considered as the end of Sultanate. As according to the a letter to the Governor of North Borneo dated 28 July 1936, the Philippine government, the successors in sovereignty of the United States of America, decided not to recognize the continued existence of the Sulu Sultanate. This means that the Sultanate no longer exists. In addition, today Philippine is a modern nation state, a republic, which indeed there is no provision for a constitutional monarch. This republic also abrogates a former sultanate and denied his sovereignty. The British, after the independence also interpreted “cession” or “pajak” to mean sale (Rafles 1830, p. 267).
There will be no compromise for the Sulu’s forces and that either they surrender or face the consequences (Quoted in Anis et al. 2013).

On 05 March 2013, under the ‘Ops Sulu’ or ‘Ops Daulat’ operation (Operation Sovereignty), Royal Malaysian Air Force fighter jets bombed Kiram’s camp in Kampung Tanduo to flush out the militiamen group which had breached the Malaysia’s sovereignty (GMA News 2013).

However, Agmibudin and several of his followers managed to escape the security cordon and the ‘house-to-house’ search for these men was later carried out in surrounding farmland and FELDA plantation (Lisa 2013). On March 07th, 2013, Malaysian Foreign Minister, Anifah Aman, issued a statement which defined the Kiram’s forces as a group of terrorists following their atrocities and brutalities committed in the killing of Malaysia’s security personnel. The label also had the concurrence of Philippine Foreign Affair (GMA News 2013).

Furthermore, on 09 March 2013, Malaysian Home Minister, Hishamuddin Hussein said that:

The ‘Ops Daulat’ will end only when none of the intruders are left in Sabah primarily because the gunmen have not laid down their arm unconditionally. (quoted in The Star 2013)

The Malaysian armed forces then have maintained tight security cordon around the operation areas and those with no identification documents (i.e. MyKad/Passport/Birth Certificate) were detained (Ruben & Sira 2013).

During the weeks of shootout, a total of 68 peoples were pronounced missing/dead. Among them were 9 Malaysia’s police officers/soldiers (as well as four captured policemen were tortured and had their bodies mutilated, i.e. beheaded), 56 Sulu’s men, and 6 were civilians. The Philippine’s security force detained 38 of Sulu’s man, and the Malaysian police detained 112 Filipinos with suspected links to Kiram under the Security Offence (Special Measures) Act 2012 is successor of the Internal Security Act [ISA]). These also included several Kiram’s family members who had entered Sabah using assumed identities, 9 arrested and charged under Section 121 of Penal Code waging war against the King, charge that carries the death penalty, including Agbimuddin Kiram (New Straits Times 2013).

The ‘Ops Daulat’ ended on 29 June 2013 and was replaced by the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM). The ESSCOM declared a covering zone of all operations from northern Kudat to south-eastern Tawau to ensure that Sabah’s eastern sea borders were safe from any threats (Muguntan 2013).

Lahad Datu Standoff: BN Life Saver?

To date, there is no specific and comprehensive literature published on the relationship between the Lahad Datu standoff and the success of BN to win most of the parliamentary seats in Sabah which have become the determinants of who forms the majority in the Malaysian parliament. However, Clara (2013a) reported that KDM leader Denis Gimpah had predicted that the anger among people in Sabah on the issues related to the Sulu incursion would affect the voting pattern in the polls.

The FMT News (2013) also suggest that the Lahad Datu standoff would affect the GE13 voting pattern in Sabah by claiming that “the standoff is a propaganda” or part of a political “sandiwara” [drama] in Sabah. The main idea being floated by the BN’s leaders was by claiming that the standoff was in fact an attempt by armed Sulus to enter Sabah to create chaos in the run-up to the May 5 election which believed to may have impact on voting pattern in Sabah.

Accordingly, the Malaysian Chronicle (2013) argues that the Lahad Datu standoff was an opportunity for the BN to inspire the people's patriotic spirit and gain the people's support in fighting against the enemy.
This was predicted to help BN retain power in the upcoming GE13. In doing so, a few days after the massive offensive launched by the Malaysian security forces against the Sulu gunmen, pro-BN groups started to take actions, including collecting donations for families of fallen police officers in Sabah, collecting signatures in support of Malaysian security forces and organising prayer ceremonies. The BN also advertised in most of the major newspapers to pay tribute to the fallen policemen.

Malaysian Chronicle (2013) also suggests that the motif behind the pro-BN groups’ activities were to simulate a common hatred and anger among people in Sabah against the intruders, which claimed by the BN leaders such as Najib Razak and Zahid Hamidi, the Defence Minister of Malaysia as Anwar Ibrahim’s political conspiracy to reduce UMNO’s vote in the GE13, considering that Sabah is the party’s ‘fixed-deposit’ state for votes (New Straits Times 2013).

As it was predicted that the Lahad Datu standoff may have significant impact on the GE13 results in Sabah, the nsnsbs international (2013), ABN News (2013) and The Straits Times (2013) reported that the Malaysian government as well as the Philippine government had publicly blamed Anwar Ibrahim, Tian Chua and Subang member of parliament R. Sivarasa on this incident. BN leaders claimed that Anwar Ibrahim, a mastermind of the incident had had suspicious (overseas) meetings with Nur Misuari, former chairman of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), one of several of Al-Qaeda tied militia in Southeast Asia, and Kiram. According to the allegations, the incursion was linked to the opposition’s campaign to award autonomy to Sabah should it win in GE13 (WikiSabah 2013).

The allegation on Anwar Ibrahim’s link to Lahad Datu standoff began after the Umno-owned Utusan Malaysia and TV3 reported nationwide a news reported by Nikko Dizon (Philippine Daily Inquirer 2013), titled “Philippine government intelligence eyes 3 groups abetting Sulu sultan’s claim”, citing an allegation that an unnamed individual allied to Anwar had given the opposition’s support to the Sulu rebels’ claim on Sabah (Kuala Lumpur Post 2013). In addition, Kuala Lumpur post also stated that Utusan Malaysia had cited a February 14 report from newswire Reuters, in which an anonymous Philippine military officer reportedly said a Malaysian opposition politician had invited the Sulu men to discuss land matters.

Specifically, in the report, Nikko (Philippine Daily Inquirer 2013), suggested that in the suspicious meeting, Kiram III have decided to reclaim Sabah or at least ask for a compensation for Sabah that is commensurate to the current land’s value, and for the royal family to be given due recognition by Malaysia. As the Malaysian political opposition was one of those who spoke with the Kirams, he supposedly gave the support to the Kirams’s claim to Sabah to manipulate the votes of the electorate in Sabah (and Sarawak) in favour of Pakatan Rakyat. Also, as the Philippine government’s policy on Sabah is to keep it in the back burner, “some people” want to push it forward. Nikko reported that the unanimous sources consistently mentioned that “these three groups appeared to have taken advantage of the decision of the Kirams to pursue their Sabah claim. They wanted to ride on the Kiram’s pursuit with their own interests in mind”.

In clarifying this allegation, The Malaysia Today (2013) and WikiSabah (2013) reported that on 16th July 2012, Anwar Ibrahim flew to Jakarta to meet Nur Misuari, the military commanders of the MNLF. The meeting was held in the Crowne Plaza Jakarta hotel and was arranged by an Indonesian Member of Parliament. The second meeting was held in Manila on 4th August 2012 to finalise and seal the agreement. In that meeting, Anwar told Misuari that he need the latter’s help to win the coming general election, and as to win the election, with at least 30 of those 57 parliamentary seats in east Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). In return, he promised Misuari that in the event PR takes over the federal government, Sabah and Sarawak would be given autonomy, as what they had been fighting for over 42 years since 1970. These two East Malaysian states would also be given 20% oil royalty, an increase of 15% from the current 5%. This would ensure that these two states would become very wealthy. Furthermore, all the non-Malaysian Filipinos in Sabah and Sarawak would be given Malaysian citizenship or by giving them permanent resident status.

8 Referring to Anwar Ibrahim
Misuari agreed with these terms. The Sulu militant then subsequently sent to Sabah to help Anwar garner the support of the Filipinos based in Sabah.

In responding to Nikko, the Philippine Daily Inquirer reporter, Defence Minister, Zahid Hamidi in a briefing on Ops Daulat at the Royal Malaysian Air Force at Alor Setar, Kedah, said “We have identified the culprits and we have evidence to prove their involvement in the intrusion. However, we are still compiling more evidence to come up with a strong case against the three suspects. The evidence will be submitted to the Attorney-General’s office for the next course of action” (The Straits Times 2013). Also, based on the statement issued by Aquino, President of Philippine, which linked Anwar to an alleged conspiracy to finance the venture of Agbimudin Kiram and his men to pressure the sultanate’s claim over Sabah, Zahid have said that the armed men were paid to carry out the attack in Sabah (New Straits Times 2013).

As reported by Burgonio (Philippine Daily Inquirer 2013), Aquino, in one of the televised address with official of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) said “Sulu incursion of Sabah is likely funded by someone as the Sulu Sultanate is known to be poor”. He indicated that the Kirams could not have financed the operation, noting that Kiram III was receiving financial support from the government through the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office (PCSO) for his regular twice-weekly dialysis sessions for kidney disease. He also noted that the Kirams would have had to spend at least P100, 000 to hire a large boat to bring their forces to Lahad Datu in Sabah, Malaysia.

Following the allegation, Najib Razak asserted that he wanted to investigate Anwar Ibrahim on the allegations that he was involved in the Lahad Datu incident as to destabilise the state (Syed Jaymal 2013) and gain benefits from the incident such as to gain victory in GE13.

Since then, BN-UMNO gained momentum in politicising the Lahad Datu fiasco. For example, Najib Razak at his political campaign (ceramah) in Bongawan, Sabah, had publicly asserted that the opposition leader was involved in the Sulu incursion into Sabah and urged voters to reject Pakatan Rakyat in the GE13. He stated that:

*Sabahans should make a statement in no uncertain terms on May 5. This (Sabah’s sovereignty) must be defended for it is bigger than the question of development, greater than bitumen roads that had been constructed. It’s not about seats (constituencies), but the question of Sabah’s dignity and sovereignty within Malaysia which the BN has promised to defend even with our lives.* (quoted in WikiSabah 2013).

Most of the local BN leaders political campaign (ceramah) during GE13 were also emphasising the link between Lahad Datu armed crisis and Anwar Ibrahim.

Given that the Lahad Datu standoff would have a significant impact on the voting pattern in Sabah, not surprisingly, BN also had extensively used the traditional Medias such as TV, radio and newspaper as well as the new social media (internet) to inculcate hatred against Anwar. The decision to heavily use the traditional media in spreading the allegation that Anwar is the mastermind of Lahad Datu incident was correct as it continuously played a major role in disseminating the information (Muniandy & Muniandy 2013, p. 75). Furthermore, considering the fact that most of the electorate in Sabah (and Sarawak) are residing in rural areas (Department of Statistics, Sabah 2009, p. 29), the used of traditional media could appropriately and successfully reach the targeted audience (Nuraina 2013). In general, the traditional media has always been in favour of BN as they are controlled or owned by mostly people related to BN (Kalinga 2007) and it can be said that opposition has little access to traditional media to disseminate their views to potential voters (Muniandy & Muniandy 2013, p. 75-78).

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9 Kiram family used 2 large boats and a speedboat to bring their men to Sabah.
Meanwhile, in responding to the allegation made by BN-UMNO groups as well as government owned newspaper, Utusan Malaysia and television station TV3, Anwar Ibrahim embarked a legal proceeding against Utusan Malaysia and TV3 for trying to link him to the incursion (Syed Jaymal 2013). In explaining this legal proceeding N. Surendran, a lawyer appointed by Anwar to manage his letter of demand said:

*It is a baseless, slanderous and malicious report. The reports were intended to mislead the Malaysian public on the main issue which is on national security.* (quoted in Syed Jaymal 2013).

Moreover, some of the Sabah-based opposition leaders such as Jeffry Kitingan and Yong Teck Lee claim that the ‘Projek IC’ was the anchor/root of the Lahad Datu crisis (Clara 2013a). They were claims that the ‘citizenship-for-vote’ deals made between the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) administration and the Filipino foreigners should be blamed for the emergence of the Lahad Datu armed crisis and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia’s longest-serving prime minister has been accused of a mastermind of the ‘Projek IC’ for the BN political survival in Sabah. In addition, the PR leaders also claimed that the Lahad Datu crisis was a conspiracy made by UMNO to divert and frighten the people of Sabah in favour of the ruling coalition. For example, Parti Keadilan Rakyat vice-president, Tian Chua claimed that the ruling UMNO had deliberately orchestrated the crisis as a conspiracy to divert and frighten the people of Sabah in favour of the ruling coalition (Free Malaysian Today 2013).

Interestingly, the Sulu’s militant landed without trouble in Lahad Datu on 09 February 2013 using sea passage between Philippine’s Muslim south and the coastal district in northern Sabah. Accordingly, Wan Sawaluddin & Ramli (2008, p. 49-50) stated that the Sabah’s border is porous and the illegal immigrants who generally dress as migrant workers can enter and leave Sabah easily. Some of them claimed to have been in Sabah since many years ago and were having dubious Malaysia’s Identification Card (IC) or being dubious citizens. In ‘Sabah’s security issues and its impacts towards Malaysia’, Wan Sawaluddin & Ramli (2008) has provide an early warning that this issue will bring about security threats with regards to the influx of dubious citizens in Sabah.

Most importantly, most of the native Sabahan claims that some of the Sulu intruders are the product of ‘Project IC’ (Alya 2013). The idea is that most of the native Sabahan believes that some of the BN political elites in both state and federal level have consistently manipulated the migrant inflows by pretence to encourage them to participate in the state economic development where shortly after arriving in Sabah were granted citizenship unlawfully. Since 1960s the migrant workers have allegedly been encouraged by BN political elites to enter Sabah for the purpose of accelerating the state’s economic development process, but the real motives were driven by political and personal objectives (Kassim 2009, p. 58, Baharin & Rachagan 1984).

Thus, in the heart of controversy lay the question of what was the impact of Lahad Datu standoff on GE13 results in Sabah. Based on the reviews of the incident which shortly afterward have appeared as been publicly regarded by BN-UMNO leaders and Philippine government as the ‘political conspiracy’, it suggests that the Lahad Datu standoff has become the BN’s ‘lifesavers’.

There are number of reasons why the Lahad Datu standoff can be regarded as the BN-UMNO lifesaver in the GE13. First, the Political conspiracy perspective has significantly help restored BN political survival in Sabah (and Sarawak) primarily because BN leaders have successfully stimulated a common hatred and anger among people in Sabah against Anwar Ibrahim and the Pakatan Rakyat. The idea of political conspiracy has somehow caused the voters in Sabah (and Sarawak) to reject Anwar and PR as to avoid another big problem. In this case the allegation that Anwar will be giving Malaysian citizenship or permanent resident status to non-Malaysian Filipinos in Sabah (and Sarawak) should the PR win the election has caused them to reject Anwar and PR for the issue of arbitrary granting citizenship to the immigrant is a very sensitive issue in Sabah.
Second, the extensive use of traditional media by BN-UMNO leaders have successfully stimulated a common hatred and anger among people in Sabah who are mostly residing in rural areas against Anwar Ibrahim and Pakatan Rakyat. With media support, BN urged voters in Sabah to avoid Pakatan Rakyat, led by Anwar from win the election. The anger has driven the voters in Sabah, mostly located in rural areas, to vote in favour of BN. In contrast, the lack of access to traditional media such as TV and radio does not allowed the opposition leaders to systematically explain whether it is true that Anwar have hands on the Lahad Datu standoff.

Third, with the allegation on Anwar’s hands on the incident, despite the fact that the local opposition leaders have succeed in highlighting local issues which evokes the electorate in east Malaysia awareness of their fundamental rights as the citizens, the Lahad Datu crisis has help restored BN political survival in Sabah. The success of local opposition leaders in stimulating the electorate in east Malaysia awareness of their fundamental rights as the citizens have overshadowed by the Lahad Datu standoff-Anwar link.

Finally, to its credit, in dealing with this standoff, BN demonstrated remarkable forbearance to the Philippine intruders and only resorted to armed force after exhausting all peaceful means to resolve the matter. Under the command of the Internal Affair and defence Ministers, the intervention of Malaysian armed forces which has successfully flushed out the intruders, has driven voters in Sabah (and Sarawak) to vote for BN rather than PR.

Conclusion

Despite the allegation that Lahad Datu standoff is either a ‘political conspiracy’ made by Anwar to topple BN in Sabah (and Sarawak) or as a result of ‘Projek IC’, it should be called as the ‘lifesaver’ of BN in GE13 rather than the ‘destructor’. I also emphasises in this paper that the Lahad Datu standoff has helped BN to successfully retain its power due to its victory in almost all parliamentary seats in Sabah (and Sarawak). The idea is that even the opposition political influence in Sabah had increase as well as the increasing dissatisfaction towards BN-UMNO leaders among people in Sabah (and Sarawak), including the Muslim Bumiputra, the traditionally strong supporters for BN-UMNO (Merdeka Centre 2012), the Lahad Datu standoff had significantly restored BN political survival in Sabah (and Sarawak).

Put simply, BN leaders have successfully manipulated the incident by triggering the anger of the electorate in Sabah against PR, especially Anwar Ibrahim, the Malaysia’s de-facto opposition leader. The success of BN in fuelling the anger among the electorate in Sabah (and Sarawak) against Anwar have then overshadowed the local issues such as marginalisation from the mainstream of national development, dissatisfaction on federal-state’s relations (or west-east relations) among the native Sabahan (and Sarawakian) and the integrity of the election process as claimed by most Sabah’s (and Sarawak’s) natives and opposition leaders. Thus it suggests that that if only there was no Lahad Datu standoff leads up to GE13, BN would not managed to gained larger electoral victory in in Sabah (and Sarawak). This is because; the local issues have been originally inspired Sabahan not to vote for BN.

However, as the Lahad Datu invasion can be regarded as a main issue that shaped the political debates including the ‘ceramah’ (political campaign) during the GE13, the incident has inspired Sabahans to be more concern about their deteriorating political rights, their sovereignty as Sabahans as well as the blatant abuse of power that claimed to have led to this situation. As claimed by most of the native Sabahan, the Lahad Datu bloody crisis is not merely about the Sultanate of Sulu territorial claim over Sabah but the challenge to protect Sabah (and Sarawak) security due to the fact that there are many immigrants in Sabah who were granted citizenship unlawfully by the some of the top states and federal level politicians in Malaysia (Amir 2013). How will the Sabahans’ deteriorating political rights and their sovereignty play out in the next Malaysian general election remains unclear, but there is a possibility that Sabah would no longer remains BN fixed-deposit for votes, especially when the local opposition leaders’ political influence
become increasingly strong following the growing of discontent among the people of Sabah towards many issues such as introduction of Good and Services Tax (GST) and top officials’ integrity deficit.

References


