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## Sabah and the Malaysia federation: leaves of the same tree

### Abstract

57 years of nationhood – Malaysia recently celebrated its national day as a proud, successful and progressive nation. Nevertheless, the 2014 edition of independence and Malaysia Day celebrations were somewhat tarnished by unwarranted calls for Sabah to secede from the Federation. Should Sabah leave?

### Keywords

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# **SABAH AND THE MALAYSIAN FEDERATION: LEAVES OF THE SAME TREE**

MOHD HAZMI MOHD RUSLI

## **Introduction**

57 years of nationhood – Malaysia recently celebrated its national day as a proud, successful and progressive nation. Nevertheless, the 2014 edition of independence and Malaysia Day celebrations were somewhat tarnished by unwarranted calls for Sabah to secede from the Federation. Should Sabah leave?

## **History**

Malaysia has its origin from pre-colonial Malay sultanates. The Malay Peninsula, or Malaya was once dominated by kingdoms of Johor, Negeri Sembilan, Kelantan, Pahang, Terengganu, Selangor, Perak, Kedah and Perlis. On the other side of the South China Sea, the Malay Sultanate of Brunei dominated Sarawak before ceding it to James Brooke. Sarawak was then made private kingdom of the Brooke family until it was ceded to the British at the end of World War II. Sabah was ruled by both Brunei and Sulu sultanates before the sovereignty over it was transferred to the British, administered by the British North Borneo Chartered Company.

Upon independence of Malaya in 1957 and the attainment of self-government for both Sabah and Sarawak in 1963, Malaysia was then formed based on the concept of self-determination through the union of the states of Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore, in the same year. Singapore was then expelled from the Federation in 1965 and consequently, Malaysia today consists of the states of Malaya with Sabah and Sarawak.

Under the 20-points elucidated in the Malaysia Agreement, Sabah and Sarawak enjoy a certain degree of autonomy within Malaysia particularly in terms of immigration controls, tariff and finance as well as education.

## **Modern Sabah**

As a state rich in natural resources, Sabah has progressed quite rapidly within Malaysia. Sabah economy relies on three key development sectors; agriculture, tourism and manufacturing. Petroleum and palm oil remained the two most exported commodities. Sabah imports mainly automobiles and machinery, petroleum products and fertilisers, food and manufactured goods.

Sabah prospered well within the Federation luring immigrants, namely the inhabitants of the islands of the southern Philippines and Kalimantan in Indonesia creating immigration problems in that state. In addition, the invasion of the Sulu army into Sabah in 2013 was a manifestation that Sabah is an economically rich state eyed by many particularly in the Sulu Sea region.

Indeed, in 1970s, Sabah was ranked second behind Selangor including Kuala Lumpur as the richest state in Malaysia. Nevertheless, as of 2010, Sabah is the poorest state in Malaysia. Slum is non-existent in Malaysia but the highest number of squatter settlements is now in Sabah. This has caused dissatisfaction among a small fraction of Sabahans that have made calls for Sabah to

leave Malaysia, unwarrantedly alleging that its Peninsula counterpart – Malaya - has been colonising the State plundering its natural resources.

### **Should Sabah Leave Malaysia?**

Sabah achieved a self-government status on 31 August 1963, 16 days before the formation of Malaysia. Within 51 years in the Federation, Sabah has undergone rapid modernisation that never took place in 253 years being under colonial rule. While it is true that the country has benefitted a lot for having Sabah - a resource rich state – within Malaysia, Sabah is also blessed to have joined Malaysia.

As stated earlier, a small minority of dissatisfied Sabahans had argued that the petroleum resources in Sabah have been unseemly transported out of Sabah to develop Malaya. This contention is not entirely true. Malaya too is known to be resource rich, both in mineral and agricultural produce. In addition, the bulk of tax collection comes from the Peninsula as 80% of the whole Malaysian population resides in Malaya. The tax revenues have been used to develop the entire country including Sabah and Sarawak.

### **Secession of Sabah under International Law**

Unlike adverse contentions made by some, Sabah was never ‘colonised’ by Malaya as it formed Malaysia with Malaya and Sarawak voluntarily. As reported by the Cobbold Commission, two-thirds of Sabahans at that time were in favour of joining Malaysia. Timor-Leste, the then Indonesian province of East Timor was invaded and annexed by Indonesia against the will of the Timorese. As a result, a referendum of self determination was held in 1999 and more than 70% Timorese chose to be independent. Timor-Leste became a sovereign nation in 2002 and still is grappling with economic problems. Nearly half the population lives in extreme poverty.

Scotland is one of the states that formed the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) in 1707. Scotland possesses its own Scottish pound as its national currency, its own national parliament, its own armed forces, enjoys a developed economy and home to a number of world-class universities. It has a high human development index. Although Scotland is an economically developed state, it took them quite some time to consider whether or not to leave the UK after more than three centuries of union with England. The independence referendum had already taken place on 18 September 2014 which will then determine the future of Scotland.

In contrast, Sabah uses the Malaysian Ringgit, enjoys a rather developing economy and does not have its own military organisation. It does not have a parliament of its own but like other states within the Federation, Sabah has a state legislative assembly. Without these qualities possessed by Scotland, it may be quite intricate for Sabah to secede. In addition, with the unjustifiable invasions by the Sulu army, the security of Sabah is always at risk. As a member of the Federation, the Malaysian armed forces have always been vigilant in protecting Sabah against the intruders from undermining Malaysia’s sovereignty.

The world community through prescription, had, for 51 years recognised Sabah as part of Malaysia although the Philippines has never officially dropped the claim. Nevertheless, the fact the Philippines has been dormant in its claim in a way showed that they have acquiesced Sabah

as part of Malaysia. Unlike Scotland, there have never been any formal demands issued by the people and/or government of Sabah to secede from Malaysia.

This clearly displayed that Malaysia is exercising effective occupation over Sabah. Therefore, it is not entirely legal under international law for Sabah to simply secede from the Federation. Furthermore, in reference to the 20-point agreement (Malaysia Agreement), Point 7 has stated clearly that Sabah has no right to secede from the Federation. Some also did argue that the 'Malaysia Agreement' has become null and void with Singapore no longer a member state of the Federation. However, Singapore never left, but was expelled.

## **Conclusion**

The calls for Sabah to leave Malaysia are uncalled for. Sabah has been progressing quite rapidly ever since it joined the Federation in 1963. While it is true that Sabah is now one of the poorest states in Malaysia, it is not fair to contend that the Malaysian government has entirely failed in developing Sabah as other states within Malaysia are doing well.

Both the Sabah State government and the Malaysian Federal government should address the plight of Sabahans to minimise the adverse effects arising from a number of problems faced by them, particularly issues involving economic developments, illegal immigrants and corruption. At the moment, the Sabah state government is working hard to revive the state's former economic glory.

Sometimes, Malaysians should stop asking what the country has done for them, but instead, ask themselves what they have done for the country. The immoderate hating towards Malaysia, has to stop. Indeed, Malaysians should work together for the betterment of the whole nation, be it Malaya, Sabah or Sarawak. Sabah is an integral part of Malaysia and for this reason, there is no issue of secession as the states within the Malaysian Federation are leaves of the same tree.

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