

# PERSPECTIVE

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## The Fall of Warisan in Sabah's Election: Telltale Signs, Causes and Salient Issues

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President of the Sabah Heritage Party (Warisan) Shafie Apdal (centre), shows his inked finger after casting his vote at a polling station during state elections in Semporna, a town in Malaysia's Sabah state on Borneo island, on September 26, 2020. Photo: AFP

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Public opinion polls conducted prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> Sabah state election provided telltale signs of Warisan's loss of support and impending electoral defeat.
- Warisan's fall from power was mostly due to the party's inability to address the priority needs of the largely rural Muslim Bumiputera and Kadazandusun voters.
- Research fieldwork during the election campaign and post-election analysis reveal that rural Sabah voters are more concerned with bread-and-butter issues, while their partisan loyalties are not steadfast. They are willing to trade their political support for programmes and policies that yield tangible benefits.
- The new state government led by Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) will face the twin challenges of appeasing increasingly demanding voters and delivering public goods effectively.
- As GRS navigates these politically uncertain times, its future in Sabah looks unpromising.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the recent Sabah state election, GRS (Gabungan Rakyat Sabah), comprising BN (Barisan Nasional), PN (Perikatan Nasional) and PBS (Parti Bersatu Sabah), won 38 seats in the state legislative assembly, prevailing over a Warisan-led coalition by a six-seat margin. The three candidates who contested as independents later pledged their support to GRS, buffering that coalition's grip on Sabah politics.

The incumbent Warisan's defeat was not unexpected given the change in mood among voters, as reflected in the two surveys carried out by Sabah-based think tank, Society Empowerment and Economic Development of Sabah (SEEDS), released prior to the election.<sup>1</sup> The two surveys clearly show voter sentiments and inclinations across all party affiliations overwhelmingly favouring the PN-led federal government, while Warisan enjoyed solid backing only from its affiliated voters, along with firm disapproval from BN- and PN-affiliated voters. Support for Warisan further ebbed between late August and the conclusion of the election campaign period. The two surveys also provide a glimpse into the issues most salient to the voters.

This article aims to answer these questions: To what extent does the mood of the voters prior to the election reflect on the electoral outcomes? What caused the swing in support to GRS? Which issues saliently influenced voters?

## **WARISAN'S STEEP RISE AND SHAKY POSITION**

First, it is important to provide an overview of Sabah politics after Warisan's rise in 2018. The expectations towards the party were high with people being disenchanted with Sabah UMNO's dominance and the slew of corruption scandals implicating BN leaders. In short, the people wanted a drastic change and they were willing to give Warisan a chance, and ending BN's decades-long rule over Sabah.

Warisan's checkered record after just 22 months in power is characterised by the party's inability to deliver on the promises of reforming the state administration and of transforming Sabah's economy. Many welcomed the changes brought about by Warisan such as abolishing communal land titles and stopping illegal logging, among other things.<sup>2</sup> Some, however, criticized Warisan for politicising the GLCs (government-linked companies) and for failing to introduce a comprehensive and long-term economic plan for Sabah.<sup>3</sup>

With 13 lawmakers leaving Warisan to support former chief minister Musa Aman, trouble brewed further within Warisan.<sup>4</sup> The defectors – most of whom were Musa loyalists – were believed to be alienated in terms of various political appointments and the distribution of government projects.<sup>5</sup> Shafie's failure to persuade them to stay put and to urge party members to close ranks led to a mini rebellion in Warisan. The party's decision to support former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad – a divisive figure in Sabah – and to go against the federal government under PN – weakened Warisan's position further. Warisan thus entered the state election a wounded lion.

## PRE-ELECTION MOOD

The first survey, conducted on 24-31 August 2020, gauged the perception of the performance of the PN-led federal government and the Warisan-led state government. A majority of the 2,350 respondents<sup>6</sup> said that PN had managed the country well (Table 1). The same affirmative response could also be seen among the voters affiliated to Warisan and Sabah-based parties, showing the bipartisan nature of the approval of the PN administration (Table 1).

Even though 42.3 percent of the respondents said that Warisan had managed the country well, a sizable 36.5 percent responded in the negative (Table 2). More than half of the voters affiliated to BN/PN and Sabah-based parties also thought that Warisan had not managed Sabah well. This may be attributed to complaints that the Covid-19 financial aid that Warisan promised to distribute did not reach the rural people and that Warisan did not have a clear economic recovery plan similar to what had been introduced by the federal government.

**Table 1: Perception of the PN-led Federal Government**

Voters	Very Positive (%)	Somewhat Positive (%)	Somewhat Negative (%)	Very Negative (%)	Total
Overall	22.7	59.5	15.8	2.0	100
Voters affiliated to Warisan/PH/UPKO <sup>1</sup>	17.9	56.3	23.0	2.8	100
Voters affiliated to BN/PN <sup>2</sup>	27.1	62.6	8.8	1.5	100
Voters affiliated to other Sabah-Based Parties <sup>3</sup>	24.1	59.6	15.0	1.3	100

Source: SEEDS (2020a)

Notes: Parti Warisan Sabah, Pakatan Harapan (PKR, DAP, Amanah), UPKO (United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation); BN/PN parties/affiliates: UMNO, Bersatu, Star Sabah, Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRs), Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Sabah People's Progressive Party (SAPP); Parti Cinta Sabah (PCS), Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Parti Gagasan Rakyat Sabah (Gagasan), Parti Kerjasama Anak Negeri (AN), Parti Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Sabah Bersatu (USNO), Parti Perpaduan Rakyat Sabah (PPRS), Parti Harapan Rakyat Sabah (HARAPAN RAKYAT), Parti Kebangsaan Sabah (PKS), Pertubuhan Perpaduan Rakyat Kebangsaan Sabah (PERTUBUHAN)

**Table 2: Perception of the Warisan-led Sabah Government**

Voters	Very Positive (%)	Somewhat Positive (%)	Somewhat Negative (%)	Very Negative Well (%)	Total
Overall	11.4	42.3	36.5	9.8	100
Voters affiliated to Warisan/PH/UPKO	22.9	65.5	11.1	-	100
Voters affiliated to BN/PN	1.7	22.1	57.5	18.7	100
Voters affiliated to other Sabah-Based Parties	6.3	32.6	50.2	10.9	100

Source: SEEDS (2020a)

In the same survey, the respondents were also asked whether or not Warisan should continue to lead Sabah. The responses were telling, particularly among young adults (between 21-40 years old) and seniors (61 years old and above), who were virtually split 50-50, reflecting a marginal incumbency advantage for Warisan. While slightly more than half of middle-aged adult respondents said Warisan should continue to lead Sabah, 47.6 percent responded in the negative.

**Table 3: Should Warisan Continue to Lead Sabah?**

Age Group	Yes (%)	No (%)
Young adults (21-40)	49.3	50.7
Middle-aged adults (41-60)	52.4	47.6
Seniors (61 and above)	49.2	50.8

Source: SEEDS (2020a)

The findings of the second survey, conducted on 21-24 September toward the end of the election campaign period and involving 1,238 respondents, continued to sound the alarm bell for Warisan. In this second sweep – a repeat of the same survey questionnaire on a different, Sabah-wide sample of respondents – there is a slight increase in the share of respondents who said they were satisfied with the performance of Sabah Chief Minister Shafie Apdal (Table 4). This, however, was counter-balanced by the increase in the proportion of respondents who were very unsatisfied with Shafie. There were also more respondents who felt that Warisan was not managing Sabah very well (Table 5).

**Table 4: Change in Perception of the Performance of Chief Minister Shafie Apdal**

	First Sweep				Second Sweep			
	Very Satisfied (%)	Quite Satisfied (%)	Quite Unsatisfied (%)	Very Unsatisfied (%)	Very Satisfied (%)	Quite Satisfied (%)	Quite Unsatisfied (%)	Very Unsatisfied (%)
Are you satisfied with the performance of Chief Minister Shafie Apdal	12.7	36.2	37.5	13.6	13.6 (change +0.9)	36.1 (change - 0.1)	28.9 (change - 8.6)	21.5 (change +7.9)

Source: SEEDS (2020a & 2020b)

**Table 5: Change in Perception of the Performance of the Warisan-led State Government**

	First Sweep				Second Sweep			
	Very Positive	Somewhat Positive	Somewhat Negative	Very Negative	Very Positive	Somewhat Positive	Somewhat Negative	Very Negative
Did the Warisan-led state government manage Sabah well?	12.6	40.1	35.5	11.8	11.9 (change - 0.7)	38.6 (change - 1.5)	32.5 (change - 3)	<b>16.8 (change +5)</b>

Source: SEEDS (2020a & 2020b)

The survey also sheds some light on the issues that may have influenced voters. Infrastructural development emerged more saliently among factors influencing respondents’ voting decisions, capturing the importance of Sabahans’ material well-being – specifically, the lack of connectivity and public facilities which are perennial issues in Sabah. Very large proportions also named state government and federal government performance as highly significant factors, while issues of a more political or ethical orientation, such as state-federal relations, Philippine claim to Sabah and party hopping, were also important, but to a lesser extent (Table 6).

**Table 6: Issues Affecting Voting Decision**

Issue	Important Issue in Voting Decision (%)
Infrastructural Development	90.1
Performance of State Government	87.4
Performance of Federal Government	82.6
State-Federal Relations	77.1
Philippine Claim to Sabah	73.6
Party Hopping	72.4

Source: SEEDS (2020b)

Note: For this section in the questionnaire, respondents were asked: “what are the important issues affecting your voting decision?”

Comparison of public approval of the federal PN government versus the Warisan state government also proves instructive. PN rated better than Warisan in terms of the way it handled key issues such as economic management, governance, security and the Covid-19 pandemic (Table 7). These responses may derive from the greater visibility of the federal government in these matters that decidedly come under federal jurisdiction. Be that as it may, the state government also can play significant roles in economic management, and the question of governance pertained mostly to the conduct of political leaders and anti-corruption measures, for which governments at all levels hold responsibility. Nonetheless, Warisan’s lower approval ratings boded ill. When it comes to ethnic relations, Warisan fared well. This is understandable, given that PN had been accused of supporting PAS’s brand of politics which is deemed unsuitable in Sabah.

**Table 7: Percentage of Respondents Satisfied with Government Handling of Key Issues**

<b>Key Issue</b>	<b>PN (%)</b>	<b>Warisan (%)</b>
Economic Management	63.6	55.5
Ethnic Relations	37.6	56.9
Governance	55.7	54.5
Security	52.0	38.8
Covid-19 Management	82.4	43.8

*Source: SEEDS (2020b)*

The two surveys painted a general picture of voter sentiments in the run-up to polling day on 26 September. But to what extent did the mood of the voters prior to the election reflect on the electoral outcomes? Which issues were most salient in influencing the voters' decision? What, ultimately, caused the swing in support to GRS?

## **RESULTS, CAUSES AND SALIENT ISSUES**

Warisan maintained its dominance in the Tawau/East Coast Division, its traditional stronghold (For a map of the election outcomes, see Anan 2020). However, overall, there was a significant decrease in the number of votes Warisan received in the Muslim Bumiputera constituencies (Table 8). Warisan and its allies were also not able to improve on their performance in the Kadazandusun constituencies, obtaining only 32.60 percent of the popular vote there compared to GRS' 50.39 percent (Table 9). In fact, Warisan's ally UPKO only managed to win one seat out of the 10 seats it contested in the Kadazandusun areas.

**Table 8: Muslim Bumiputera Constituencies: Popular Votes, Seats Contested and Seats Won, by Party/Coalition**

<b>Party</b>	<b>Seat Contested</b>	<b>Seat Won</b>	<b>Popular Votes (%)</b>
Warisan	38	19	39.22 (46.30)
PKR	1	-	0.73
UPKO	2	-	1.17
		<b>Total</b>	<b>41.12</b>
Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS)			
BN	25	12	27.53
PN	16	8	18.03
PBS	2	1	1.01
		<b>Total</b>	<b>46.57 (45.95)</b>
Others			
PCS	41	-	3.72
LDP	21	-	1.44
USNO	31	-	1.62
PPRS	17	-	0.40
Gagasan	13	-	0.34
AN	-	-	-
HR	4	-	1.00
PKS	1	-	0.05
Independent	18	-	3.74
		<b>Total</b>	<b>12.31</b>

Source: recalculated from <https://dashboard.spr.gov.my/#!home><sup>7</sup>

Note: number in parentheses show the popular votes obtained in 2018



**Table 9: Kadazandusun Constituencies: Popular Votes, Seats Contested and Seats Won, by Party/Coalition**

Party	Seat Contested	Seat Won	Popular Votes (%)
Warisan	8	2	14.55 (32.55)
PKR	4	1	7.02
UPKO	10	1	11.03
		<b>Total</b>	<b>32.60</b>
Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS)			
BN	11	-	11.98
PN	9	8	20.28
PBS	16	6	18.13
		<b>Total</b>	<b>50.49 (45.70)</b>
PCS	23	-	5.72
LDP	16	-	2.13
USNO	10	-	0.58
PPRS	3	-	0.13
Gagasan	8	-	0.55
AN	2	-	0.26
HR	-	-	-
PKS	-	-	-
Independent	14	-	7.64
		<b>Total</b>	<b>17.01</b>

Source: recalculated from <https://dashboard.spr.gov.my/#!home>

Note: number in parentheses show the popular votes obtained in 2018

Clearly, there was a significant swing of support from Warisan to GRS, especially in the Muslim Bumiputera and Kadazandusun areas. What were the issues that account for this? Observers attribute this to a confluence of factors such as the party's inability to win the support of the Kadazandusun, disorganised campaigning, poor handling of the PTI (*pendatang tanpa izin* or illegal immigrants issue), low voter turnout, and so on (see, for instance, James Chin and Bridget Welsh).<sup>8</sup>

The election shows that the mood and needs of the voters (particularly those in the rural areas) cannot be taken for granted. Warisan campaigned on the idea that unity and non-racial politics are the key for Sabah's progress. This approach, according to the Ilham Centre think tank, was effective and managed to capture the voters' imagination.<sup>9</sup>

Warisan went on and promoted messages such as "Sabahans unite not divide" and "In God we trust, unite we must". Billboards were also erected in strategic areas showing Shafie's famous quote: "We are here to build a nation, not a particular race or religion". The message was accompanied by Shafie's self-portrait á la Che Guevara – the Cuban revolutionary leader. While such messages resonated well among those in the semi-urban and urban areas, the voters in the interior were less excited, and had "different priorities".<sup>10</sup> Some even downplayed the messages, accusing Warisan of wanting to integrate foreigners (read: illegal immigrants) into society on the pretext of unity and nation-building.<sup>11</sup>

The new narrative that Warisan was trying to promote was not rejected outright; instead some criticised the party for its failure to address more pressing issues facing the people such as economic livelihood and infrastructural development. PN quickly filled this void by elevating Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin who was already quite likeable for his populist policy in handing out various economic assistance in responding to the Covid-19 outbreak. In the first survey by SEEDS, 89.6 percent of the respondents were satisfied with the performance of Muhyiddin as prime minister.<sup>12</sup>

PN's strategy of putting Muhyiddin Yassin's face along with the tag "abah" (our father) and "kita jaga kita" (we take care of each other) on its campaign posters worked well in increasing his popularity among voters in the interior. On-the-ground observation during the campaign period found spirited support for PN due to its distribution of various financial aid to the needy to alleviate their economic hardship, including one woman vegetable seller interviewed for this research.<sup>13</sup> While PN was credited for extending economic support, Warisan was blamed for failing to make sure that financial aid reached the rural people.<sup>14</sup>

We also found broad support for local-based parties affiliating with PN as it had the access and necessary resources to develop the country. One university student residing in Keningau said that Star Sabah was in a much better position to develop the area as it was part of the ruling coalition (Jeffrey Kitingan of Star Sabah was one of the main contenders for the state seat of Tambunan under the Keningau parliamentary seat).<sup>15</sup> The same sentiment was echoed by a candidate contesting as an independent in Matunggong (a state seat under the Kudat parliamentary seat in the north of Sabah) who claimed that the people in his constituency were struggling to commute to the nearby town as the road access was bad.<sup>16</sup> He supported PN openly, hoping that the ruling coalition would improve the infrastructural development in his constituency. While doing fieldwork in Keningau, the author saw a banner that read: "ada aspal/jambatan, ada undi" (tar the roads and build a bridge, and our vote is guaranteed). The message from the voters was clear: their support depended on programmes and policies that yield tangible benefits.

Signs of impending loss of support were clear for Warisan but the party did not act swiftly to reconnect with voters or to address their most pressing needs: infrastructural development and economic security. While promising to work with PH at the federal level in bringing the much-needed reforms to Sabah, Warisan was not bold enough to initiate meaningful changes in the administration. The mood of the electorate prior to the election gave some indication about the issues that are salient to them and their perception of PN and Warisan leaders.

Despite suffering defeat in the election and now struggling to look for a stable federal partner, all is not lost for Warisan. It is still the party with the most number of seats (22) in the state legislative assembly. All that Warisan needs to do is to play its role effectively as the opposition in order to regain the people's trust.

The people are watching GRS closely. The new Chief Minister Hajiji Noor is known for his "nice guy" image but his leadership ability in managing a complex state like Sabah is yet to be proven. There is already grumbling that GRS is slow in tackling the state's economy despite the recent formation of the Sabah Economic Council.<sup>17</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The change in perception of Warisan prior to the election was significantly reflected on the electoral outcomes. Warisan's defeat was not only attributable to the party's internal weaknesses but also to its failure in addressing bread-and-butter issues in the rural Muslim Bumiputera and Kadazandusun areas.

GRS was quick to take advantage by convincing voters that it had the access and the necessary resources to alleviate voters' economic concerns during the Covid-19 pandemic. The election showed that voters particularly in the rural Sabah are still attracted to programmes and policies that can yield tangible benefits. This explains why despite Warisan's effort of promoting unity, values and sense of belonging in its campaigns, it failed to draw the support of the largely rural voters. The challenge for the GRS-led government is to meet the expectations of the increasingly demanding voters and to deliver public goods effectively.

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<sup>1</sup> Society Empowerment and Economic Development of Sabah (SEEDS) (2020a). 'The Sabah Imperative: PRN 2020 Key Realities on the Ground'

<<https://www.facebook.com/seedssabah1/>>(accessed 15 October 2020) & Society Empowerment and Economic Development of Sabah (SEEDS) (2020b). 'SEEDS Sabah Electoral Project 2020: Findings from the Second Sweep' <<https://www.facebook.com/seedssabah1/>>(accessed 15 October 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Julia Chan, "Shafie's year-end rated: The good, the bad... and the 'we'll see'", *Malay Mail*, 26 December 2018 <<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2018/12/26/shafies-year-end-rated-the-good-the-bad...-and-the-well-see/1706276>> (accessed 11 October 2020).

<sup>3</sup> FMT Reporters, "You're just like BN, Bersih slams Warisan on GLC appointments". *Free Malaysia Today*, 4 June 2020 <<https://www.freemalysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/06/04/youre-just-like-bn-bersih-slams-warisan-on-glc-appointments/>> (accessed 11 October 2020) & FMT Reporters, "Warisan excuse proves it failed to manage Sabah economy, Najib says", *Free Malaysia Today* <<https://www.freemalysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/08/03/warisan-excuse-proves-it-failed-to-manage-sabah-economy-najib-says/>> (accessed 14 October 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Julia Chan, "Warisan assemblymen who supported Musa Aman in toppling state govt considered sacked", *Malay Mail*, 31 July 2020 <<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/07/31/warisan-assemblymen-who-supported-musa-aman-in-toppling-state-govt-consider/1889900>> (accessed 20 December 2020).

<sup>5</sup> An anonymous UMNO party leader, text message to author, 20 December 2020.

<sup>6</sup> The respondents were selected from Sabah's 25 parliamentary seats, stratified according to voting districts, age group and ethnicity.

<sup>7</sup> "Pilihanraya Umum DUN Sabah Ke-16" (The 16<sup>th</sup> Sabah State Legislative Assembly Election), Election Commission of Malaysia <<https://dashboard.spr.gov.my/#!/home>> (accessed 20 October 2020)

<sup>8</sup> James Chin, "Commentary: Sabah's surprise results – and how Warisan lost big in state elections", *Channel News Asia*, 28 September 2020 <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/sabah-election-results-how-warisan-lost-big-grs-won-huge-13156026>> (accessed 14 October 2020) & Bridget Welsh, "Why Warisan Plus lost – a preliminary analysis", *Malaysiakini*, 28 September 2020 <<https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/544346>> (accessed 15 October 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Panel Penyelidikan Ilham Centre (Ilham Centre Research Panel). 2020. *Ringkasan Eksekutif: Pola Pengundian Pilihan Raya Negeri Sabah 2020 (Executive Summary: Voting Pattern in the 2020 Sabah State Election)*. Ilham Centre.

- <sup>10</sup> Anonymous Chinese NGO volunteer, text message to author, October 11, 2020.
- <sup>11</sup> Anonymous Kadazandusun party volunteer, text message to authors, October 11, 2020.
- <sup>12</sup> SEEDS (2020a).
- <sup>13</sup> Anonymous, personal communication, September 23, 2020.
- <sup>14</sup> James Chin, “Commentary: Sabah’s surprise results – and how Warisan lost big in state elections”, *Channel News Asia*, 28 September 2020 <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/sabah-election-results-how-warisan-lost-big-grs-won-huge-13156026> (accessed 11 October 2020)
- <sup>15</sup> An anonymous undergraduate student of Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), personal communication, September 24, 2020.
- <sup>16</sup> An anonymous member of a local-based party, personal communication, September 20, 2020.
- <sup>17</sup> n.a. 2020. “Sabah Economic Council formed, *Daily Express*, 29 October 2020 < <https://www.dailyexpress.com.my/news/160730/sabah-economic-council-formed/>> (accessed 8 December 2020).

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