



It's time we got to know you, East Malaysia



Our Borneo brethren can teach us a thing or two about living in diversity, while we can certainly give them the attention they deserve.

By Cynthia Hoo

Malaysia Day has not been celebrated with much gusto in Malaysia for many years now, and it was no different last September 16. The festivities were perfunctory... but there was one pretty special exhibition in KL.

In exploring what it meant to be Malaysian, the fortnight-long exhibition in a shopping mall was refreshingly candid. One particularly thoughtful installation was by a young Sabahan artist, Yee I-Lann, who pulled no punches in putting across her views.

Using only a smattering of words in her visual installation, she nevertheless spoke volumes about the neglect suffered by the states in East Malaysia.

Hundreds stopped to view the black-and-white photographs of the four national leaders which she put up on a glass wall. Taken at the declaration of the formation of Malaysia on September 16, 1963, the photographs did not come with captions. Most people had no problems recognising Tunku Abdul Rahman, while some hesitated at the photograph of a young Lee Kuan Yew. But many failed to recognise Sarawak Chief Minister Stephen Kalong Ningkan and Sabah Chief Minister Fuad Stephens.

That comes as no surprise. For one thing, most of the visitors to the exhibition were from Peninsular Malaysia where there is woeful ignorance about the other half of Malaysia. And secondly, Sabah and Sarawak get only perfunctory treatment in our school textbooks, as Yee illustrated through her installation of a row of secondary school blue pinafores with blank name labels.

This was one exhibition that would never have garnered much interest previously, but times have changed. Sabah and Sarawak have become an undeniable part of Malaysian consciousness, and their future is now one of the country's hottest political issues. And while Yee is one of Malaysia's most articulate voices on the unequal relationship between East Malaysia and Peninsular Malaysia, she's not the only one.

This is, of course, the outcome of the political turmoil stirred up by the general elections of 2008 and 2013. Soon after the 2008 election upended Malaysia's staid political scene with the dominant ruling BN coalition almost losing power, the Borneo states came under the spotlight because their population seemed to entertain political thinking that was vastly different from that which had become apparent in Peninsular Malaysia – while West Malaysians voted for the opposition in overwhelming numbers, East Malaysians remained staunchly supportive of BN. Why was this so? This question has stirred up intense debate.

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Dr Jeniri Amir, a political scientist from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, agrees that the political centre of gravity has indeed swiftly shifted to Sabah and Sarawak. Politicians have quickly realised that these two states hold the key to Putrajaya. Win Them, Win All. Opposition veteran Lim Kit Siang recently said the political future of Malaysia in the 14th general election “hinged on Sabah and Sarawak.”



Merdeka Day celebrations in Ba Kelalan.



Sarawak State Legislative Assembly Building.
Photograph: Peter Gronemann

“Sabah and Sarawak’s status as ‘fixed deposit states’ (for BN) means that more strategic attention is now being given to East Malaysia,” says Dr Arnold Puyok, a political scientist also with Universiti Malaysia Sarawak.

He also notes that cheaper flights in recent years mean that more people from the peninsula have been able to visit Sabah and Sarawak, and more students from West Malaysia have enrolled in East Malaysian universities. “They seem to like Sabah and Sarawak’s ethnic diversity and tolerance,” he adds.

So, for a variety of reasons, primarily political ones, consciousness of Borneo has been heightened. Many in Peninsular Malaysia suddenly realise that there is actually another Malaysia across the sea filled with real people with real lives, not just exotically-costumed dancers. This is accompanied by the realisation that Malaysia’s rapid economic development has often come at the expense of Sabah and Sarawak,

which provide much of the natural resources but receive few of the benefits. This new consciousness quickly manifested itself in an outpouring of efforts to redress the developmental gap. The last few years have seen a mushrooming of fundraisers and initiatives by volunteer groups, such as micro-systems to provide electricity and clean water to villages.



Bajau children of Bohey Dulang, Sabah.
Photograph: johnjodeery

be done to enhance national integration and mutual understanding.”

This soon took on a more political perspective and morphed into a heated debate on the neglect of East Malaysia, progressing into a discussion on the legal and political position of Sabah and Sarawak within the federation. Most Malaysians aren't aware that both states were once independent nations, albeit briefly, before they joined Malaya and Singapore in 1963 to form Malaysia. The “oath stone” in Keningau, a small town in Sabah, quickly shot to fame. People began sharing photographs of the stone etched with the guarantees given to Sabah when it became part of Malaysia.

At the same time, Sabahans and Sarawakians too have become more conscious of their own history, with grassroots movements like the Save Atkinson Clock Tower group springing up to preserve their heritage.

Pull this all together and there is more than enough evidence of a sea of change in Malaysia's social dynamics. It is now impossible to return to the old days when East Malaysia played second fiddle to the peninsula.

There are limits, of course. “There is still a lot of ignorance among West Malaysians about Sabah and Sarawak,” says Jeniri. “A lot more needs to