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Value, voice, belonging: The Sabah perspective on Malaysia's story

Borneo Post (Kuching), Malaysia



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Mariah Doksil

FROM a district office in Kota Belud to the Federal Cabinet in Putrajaya, Datuk Seri Panglima Salleh Said Keruak has viewed Malaysia from more than one vantage point.

He served as a district officer in Kota Belud before becoming Sabah Chief Minister, Speaker of the State Legislative Assembly, and later a Federal Minister, moving between the everyday concerns of the local community and the highest levels of government.

Yet when asked what being Malaysian means to him, his answer does not begin with a title, a flag or a national celebration.

"To me, being Malaysian means we are part of one country even though we come from different backgrounds, cultures and histories."

For Salleh, that sense of belonging has never required him to choose between two identities.

"As a Sabahan, I always see Malaysia from Sabah's own experience. Malaysia was formed in 1963 based on partnership and mutual respect," he said.

After more than four decades in public service, he sees that partnership as something that must be felt in everyday life—in whether citizens feel respected, included, and treated fairly.

That is where the Malaysia Day conversation becomes both more complex and more meaningful for Sabah.

The state's relationship with the federation is not only about history or identity. It is also about whether development, opportunity, and economic progress reach communities across a state distinguished by its size, geography, and diversity.

"For me, there is no conflict in being proud to be Sabahan and proud to be Malaysian," Salleh added.

Sabah, he noted, is home to around 3.8 million people from many ethnic groups, cultures and religions, speaking different languages and living across urban centres, rural communities, islands and remote areas.

Salleh described Sabah as unique because of its people, noting that this diversity offers an important lesson for Malaysia: unity does not require uniformity.

"We do not need to be the same in order to be united. We just need to respect our differences and remember that we are still part of the same country," he said.

His years in public service have also shown him that beneath Malaysia's regional and cultural differences, people share many of the same aspirations.

"What I saw was that most ordinary Malaysians want similar things. They want good education for their children, stable jobs, manageable living costs and a better future for their families."

For Sabah, however, delivering on those aspirations means confronting practical development challenges, ranging from roads, water, and electricity to healthcare, education, and internet connectivity.

Salleh argues that when Sabah asks for better infrastructure and development, it should not be viewed as a request for special treatment.

"It is about making sure development is fair. A stronger Sabah will also make Malaysia stronger," he said.

For Sabah, the strength of that partnership is ultimately measured in what it delivers in jobs, investment, infrastructure and opportunities for its people.

For Universiti Malaysia Sabah senior lecturer and economist Dr Izaan Azyan Abdul Jamil, the state already possesses many

of the ingredients needed for a stronger economy.

The challenge is not simply producing more.

It is ensuring Sabah captures a greater share of the value created from what it produces.

Moving up the economic value chain

"Malaysia is blessed with several forms of 'black gold', namely crude oil, crude palm oil and natural gas. Interestingly, Sabah has all three and is an important producer of these commodities," Izaan said.

Yet much of the economic value generated from those resources is realised elsewhere.

"We produce the raw materials, but much of the processing, manufacturing and value creation takes place elsewhere," he added.

For Izaan, that is one of the central economic questions facing Sabah: how can the state move beyond being a supplier of commodities and become a stronger centre for processing, manufacturing and innovation?

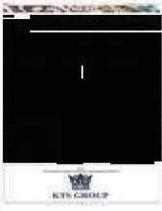
His solution is for the state to move up the value chain.

"Better late than never," he said, adding that agriculture offers one of the clearest opportunities.

Malaysia's food import bill, Izaan pointed out, demonstrates the scale of the domestic market waiting to be tapped. If Sabah can capture even a small share, the economic impact could be significant.

"If Malaysia is importing around RM80 billion worth of food and Sabah could capture even five percent of that market, that would represent a very significant economic opportunity for the state," Izaan said.

The opportunity, he suggested, is not limited to food production. Food processing, packaging, branding and exports, as well



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as biodiesel, dairy, livestock and herbal products, could create additional economic activity while generating employment and businesses within Sabah.

Renewable energy presents another opportunity.

Reliable and affordable green energy could help Sabah attract industries that require dependable power, including advanced manufacturing, food processing, data infrastructure and biotechnology.

In that sense, energy is not simply an infrastructure issue. It is part of Sabah's investment proposition.

Izaan also touched on tourism, a major driver of Sabah's economy. He believes the state can do more to retain value from the sector.

The focus, he said, should be on encouraging longer stays, increasing visitor spending and spreading tourism beyond established hotspots.

The economic opportunity, however, must ultimately be translated into better livelihoods.

For young Sabahans, Izaan said, that means having access to better jobs and opportunities to participate directly in the state's growth as employees, entrepreneurs, innovators and digital creators.

It is also where Izaan's thinking about Sabah's future intersects with the larger Malaysia Day question.

He acknowledged that when he was younger, he sometimes wondered whether Sabah might be better off separating from Malaysia because of the development gap he observed.

However, his perspective evolved with time, professional experience, and observing international developments such as Brexit.

Today, he believes Sabah's development gap is real, but maintains that the solution lies in stronger federal-state cooperation, adequate funding, and greater autonomy within Malaysia rather than separation.

"Sabah can prosper when Malaysia prospers, and Malaysia can become stronger when every

state and every community is given the opportunity to contribute," Izaan said.

Representation and the creative ecosystem

While Salleh's vision of Malaysia is rooted in belonging and Izaan's in economic opportunity, Sabahan artist Tasyareena Jekaria, widely known as Memeto Jeck, brings the conversation into another domain: who gets to tell Sabah's story.

Her work has taken her beyond Malaysia, with creative experiences in Japan, South Korea, Singapore, France, Australia, Thailand and the United States.

Yet this international exposure has not weakened her connection to Sabah.

Instead, it has given her another perspective on the place she comes from, and on the importance of carrying its stories beyond its borders.

For Memeto, art can preserve memories, document community life and create space for voices that might otherwise be overlooked.

"We can love Malaysia, but at the same time we can fight for Sabah's rights and interests," she said.

Her understanding of being Malaysian therefore includes a question of representation: who is heard, who is given space and whose stories become part of the national narrative.

"Sabah is not merely a place on the map of Malaysia. It has people, memories, culture, struggles and hopes."

That belief has shaped her work and her efforts to strengthen Sabah's creative community through Ruangtamu Ekosistem, which brings together artists, communities, young people and experienced practitioners through exhibitions, workshops, collaborations and knowledge-sharing.

The aim is not simply to provide a platform for art, but to help build the networks and opportunities that enable artists and creative practitioners to sustain their work.

"Art does not grow through individuals alone, but through an ecosystem," she said.

There is an interesting parallel between that idea and Izaan's economic argument. Sabah's challenge is not necessarily a shortage of resources.

It has natural resources, agricultural potential, tourism assets, young people, artists and ideas.

The central challenge lies in building the systems and infrastructure that allow those resources and talents to generate greater value within the state.

For Izaan, that means moving up the economic value chain.

For Memeto, it means strengthening the creative ecosystem.

For Salleh, it means ensuring development is fair enough for people to feel respected, included and treated fairly.

Although their professions and experiences differ, their visions for Sabah's future converge around a shared principle: being part of Malaysia should create room for Sabah to contribute more, prosper further, and speak for itself.

For Memeto, there is no contradiction between a Sabahan identity, a Malaysian identity, and a wider global outlook.

"We can be children of Sabah and at the same time Malaysians and citizens of the world," she said, adding that the idea may be particularly relevant to a younger generation growing up more connected to the rest of the country and the world than ever before.

This demographic is increasingly informed about Sabah's history, its interests, and its place in the federation, while navigating an economy and culture no longer confined by geography.

Looking ahead

For Salleh, that generation carries a responsibility to understand where Malaysia came from while continuing to shape where it goes next.

"Malaysia Day should remind us that the work of building Malaysia is not finished. Every



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generation must continue to improve the country," Salleh said.

For Sabah, perhaps the question is no longer simply where it belongs, but how it can continue to grow, contribute and shape the Malaysia it is part of, with the space to remain fully itself.

To me, being Malaysian means we are part of one country even though we come from different backgrounds, cultures and histories.

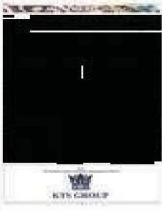
Datuk Seri Panglima Salleh Said Keruak



Izaan, seen third right front row with students, believes that the solution to Sabah's development gap lies in stronger federal-state cooperation, adequate funding, and greater autonomy within Malaysia.



Salleh meeting members of the public during his tenure as a Federal Minister.



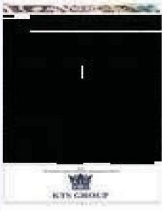
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Memeto with one of her artworks during an exhibition in France.



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SUMMARIES

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