

# Issue on Sabah's rights to take centre stage: UMS lecturer

DE 9.4.2018 6

KOTA KINABALU: The issue about Sabah's rights under the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63) will again take centre stage at the coming polls, says a political analyst, but he warns it being used as ammunition by politicians.

While it has always been an issue championed by the opposition, this time Barisan Nasional (BN) will afford special mention of the MA63 in their manifesto.

Lee Kuok Tiung, senior lecturer at Universiti Malaysia Sabah, said the effectiveness of raising such an issue was proven during the 2016 Sarawak state polls.

"Will it work? Of course," he told *FMT*.

In that polls, the BN banked on MA63 and other local issues, while the opposition used national issues including the 1MDB controversy, he said.

"Both you and I know the election results," he said, referring to BN's landslide victory, winning 72 out of the 82 seats.

"Why has MA63 become so much of a hot topic lately? Part of the reason is because both the BN and opposition saw the marketability of MA63 as a local issue," he said to *FMT*.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi had previously assured during his visit to Sabah that the rights of Sabahans, as enshrined in the MA63, will be incorporated in the BN manifesto for GE14, which will be unveiled tonight.

Lee said Prime Minister Najib Razak had also shown a commitment to restore rights in the agreement which were taken over or sidelined.

But Lee warned that MA63, which he said was a "taboo" subject under Dr Mahathir Mohamad's administration, has become so popular that politicians might abuse the issue just to win support.

"Surely MA63 will be the hottest issue during the campaign period. Only now we're free to talk about MA63 (whereas) during Mahathir's time, we saw Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) leaders put into jail under the Internal Security Act for bring-

ing up the issue.

"My concern is as the name 'MA63' is so popular, lots of opportunists will try to manipulate the term for their personal interests, especially to win votes. We must be able to differentiate between genuine fighters with opportunists," he said.

Lee said some politicians did not even understand what the MA63 is about, but said the people will ultimately realise whether or not it is political gimmick.

"We must know what's contained in MA63. Then only can we measure or judge what have or haven't been delivered.

"But trust me it wouldn't work by just mentioning the name 'MA63'. The voters will compare whose proposal and plan is more realistic and workable," he said.

"It's easy to mention MA63 to play with emotions to win votes. To work on it, however, is not easy. We need legal practitioners, those with knowledge and experience how legal things work.

"We must understand the supreme law in Malaysia is the Federal Constitution. The MA63 is an international treaty or agreement. From here, you can see the challenges to transform it into something that can be enjoyed by Sabahans and Sarawakians," he said.

Lee said both BN and the opposition had covered issues linked to MA63 in their previous manifestos.

But he welcomed Najib's willingness to negotiate the rights was a step in the right direction, including the committee headed by Foreign Minister Anifah Aman on the devolution of powers to Sabah and Sarawak.

"Yes up to today we haven't seen much outcome from the negotiations but there are signs of success already in terms of devolution of power, autonomy and more development funds for Sabah and Sarawak."

"Also don't forget he's the prime minister (Najib) who recognised Sept 16 as Malaysia Day and declared it as a public holiday," he said.