World Directory of Minorities

Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities in Sabah

Profile

Estimated population: 2,997,000 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2006)

Ethnicity: Kadazan-Dusun, Chinese, Bajau, Malay, Bugis, Murut

First language/s: Kadazan-Murut, Bajau, Malay, Hakka, Cantonese, Murut, Mandarin

Religion/s: Animism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism

Most of Sabah's more than 3 million people can be considered as minorities within the context of the whole country, since they are for the most part non-Malay and are either indigenous (more than 60%), Chinese (about 20%) or from ethnic groups originating from southern Philippines, Indonesia or other parts of Malaysia. Some of the largest minorities are the Kadazan-Dusun (about 25%), Bajau (15%), and Murut (3%). These are in fact broad categories, with for example 13 main languages spoken within the Kadazan-Dusun grouping. About 500,000 people speak languages from four indigenous language families: Bajau, Dusunic, Murutic or Paitanic. Less than 10 per cent are ethnic Malays.

There is a great diversity within these numerous indigenous and other minority groups. The Kadazun-Dusun, for example, traditionally lived in longhouses and planted rice on the fertile hills and plains of Sabah, as well as conducting some nomadic slash-and-burn agriculture. A majority of Kadazun-Dusun are now Catholics or animists, and some have converted to Islam, but some of their ancestral animistic beliefs are maintained in festivals such as the Pesta Kaamatan, or Harvest Festival. Younger generations have moved away from many of these traditions and some occupy prominent professional posts.

The vast majority of Bajau are Muslims, and like the Kadazun-Dusun are a grouping of distinct ethnic groups who share related linguistic and cultural origins. They were, until very recently, a nomadic, seafaring people, possibly originating from the southern Philippines, who are sometimes referred to as Sea Gypsies, practically living on their boats, the lepa-lepa. This traditional way of life has for the most part disappeared as many now live in settlements on the west coast, particularly around Mengkabong and Tempasuk.

The Murut also bring together a number of other ethnic groups and speak 15 distinct languages which belong to the Murutic branch of the Austronesian family of languages. They tend to be concentrated in the south-west interior of Sabah and, as the term murut indicates, they are traditionally 'hill people'. Many Murut have converted to Christianity, though some have more recently converted also to Islam, and occupy various official and prominent professional posts.

Historical context

Much of the interior of Sabah remained relatively untouched for centuries under the sway of nominal rulers in neighbouring Brunei. Islam itself was a late arrival, starting from about the early fifteenth century when the Malacca empire entered the Muslim world and spread its influence into Borneo. This led to the establishment of a Sultanate in Brunei which controlled all of Borneo at its high point. Sabah, in the northern part of Borneo, was to be controlled later by the Sulu Sultanate, and eventually pass to the control of the British North Borneo Company in 1881. It became a British protectorate in 1888, then the colony known as North Borneo in 1946, before eventually joining the Malaysian federation in 1963 as Sabah.

The demographic weight of the indigenous peoples allowed them to exert significant political and legal roles soon after independence, with one political party associated with the Kadazan-Dusun, the United Pasok-Momogun Kadazan Organization, governing Sabah from 1963 to 1967, and another, the Parti Bersatu Sabah, also able to rule from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. This in turn ensured that these minorities have had extensive legal and constitutional provisions to guarantee – at least to some degree – traditional land rights and customary law.

The relative strength of the indigenous peoples began to weaken from the 1980s due partially to internal divisions within and between the various indigenous groupings. Additionally, the Malay and Muslim segments of the population are increasingly on the ascendant, not least following an influx of perhaps as many as a million Muslims – many of them from Indonesia or the Philippines – into Sabah, which has tipped the ethnic balance in the state and which seems in recent years to have shifted political power away from indigenous groups.

Current issues

Refugees and illegal immigration – arguably facilitated and even encouraged by state authorities – have altered Sabah's ethnic composition to such an extent that indigenous peoples are in effect being politically marginalized and, as a consequence, their rights relating to landownership and resource allocation have been increasingly watered down in recent years.

By permitting an influx of perhaps more than a million Muslims from the southern Philippines and Indonesia in the last two decades to settle and acquire voting rights (even if their presence is not always admitted in official figures) the current government under the UMNO (United Malays National Organization) party has ensured its political domination over Sabah since it derives most of its support from Muslim groups. The indigenous non-Muslim groups such as the Kadazan-Dusun, Muruts and Chinese are declining into demographic and political insignificance, while Muslim groups have become dominant both in demographic and political terms. Indonesians are thought to have only constituted about 5.5 per cent of the population in 1960 but represented 21.3 per cent in 1990. Estimates suggest that the figure is much higher today, though these figures do not necessarily include all illegal immigrants.

Though in theory indigenous people in Sabah are supposed to benefit from some of the programmes for Bumiputera, the trend has been for authorities to direct these mainly towards the now dominant Malays and Muslims. Indigenous peoples and non-Muslim minorities such as the Chinese are clearly under-represented in the political and economic arenas.

Customary landownership has also been weakened and is increasingly threatened. Since the mid-1990s, when a political party connected with indigenous peoples last lost power in the State of Sabah, the land rights of indigenous peoples theoretically protected under the Sabah Land Ordinance 1930 and the Sarawak Land Code have increasingly been restricted or set aside for logging and other development

activities. Large tracts of native customary land have been included in forest reserves for which logging concessions are awarded – usually without the knowledge of indigenous peoples. Though in theory the land should eventually revert to indigenous communities, recent cases, for example in Tawau, demonstrate that they are instead often used for other purposes, such as by other government agencies, or sold to corporations for plantations.