

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 7 May 2018

GE14: A Victory for Barisan Nasional in Sarawak

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Sarawak will continue to be Barisan Nasional’s safe deposit role in the 14th General Elections (GE 14) on 9 May 2018.
- The 2016 Sarawak state elections suggest that the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition is likely to increase its number of parliamentary seats this time round from 25 to 27 seats.
- Sarawak BN’s promotion of “Sarawak for Sarawakians” and the many pro-Sarawak measures that it has taken in recent years will work in its favour on 9 May.

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INTRODUCTION

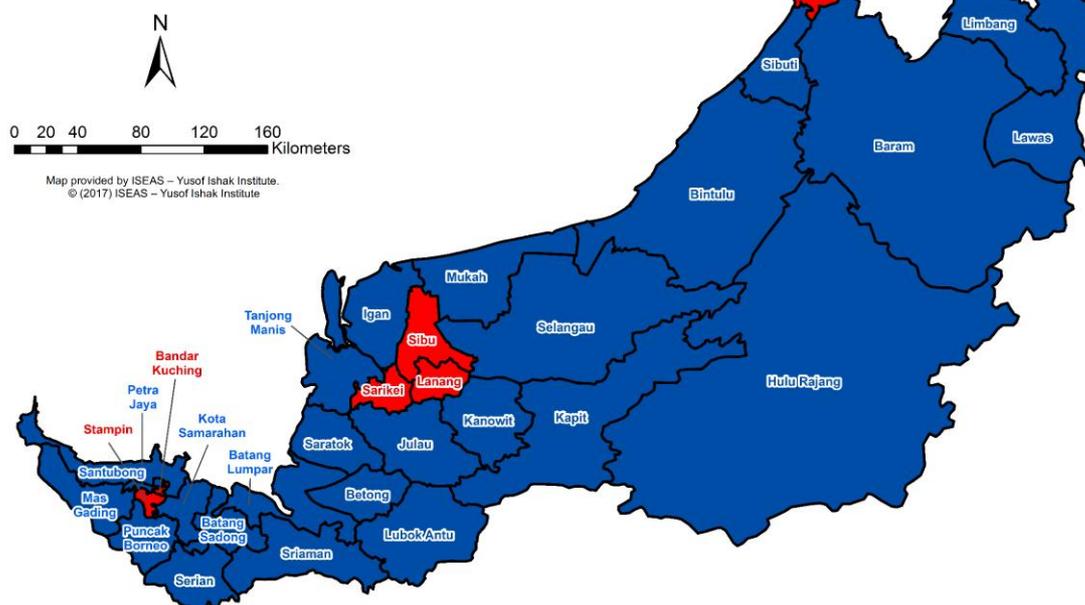
Malaysia’s general elections on May 9 promise to return many interesting results. Most analysts seem to expect the Barisan Nasional (BN) to be returned to power. For the opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH), only a huge swing among voters to its side, a so-called “Malay tsunami” will give it a chance of winning.

Traditionally, political observers have labelled Sabah and Sarawak as ‘safe deposit’ states of BN. In past parliamentary elections, both states have contributed huge numbers of seats to allow BN to stay in power. This time around, Sarawak is again expected to perform this ‘safe deposit’ role. In fact, the question seems to be, will Sarawak BN under the new Chief Minister Abang Johari secure even more parliamentary seats this year?

In the last general elections, held in 2013, BN won 133 of the 222 parliamentary seats. Of the 133 seats, Sarawak won 25 seats, against 6 seats won by the opposition (Stampin, Bandar Kuching, Sarikei, Lanang, Sibiu, and Miri, see Map below). Sabah contributed 22 seats.¹

Sarawak GE-13 Parliamentary Constituency Winning Party

- Barisan Nasional (BN)
- Pakatan Harapan (PH)



Map provided by ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.
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If the 2016 state elections can serve as a bellwether for Sarawak’s GE 14 outcome, then the situation is looking very rosy for BN. In the 2016 state elections, Sarawak won 72 of the 82 seats. The election was then led by Adenan Satem, and the BN rode on the back of his rising popularity and his stance of Sarawak for Sarawakians. Sarawak is the only Malaysian state that presently holds its state elections separate from the general parliamentary elections. It is unique in other politically significant ways as well.

SARAWAK: NOT LIKE ANY OTHER STATE

Population and Political Parties

In Sarawak, no one single ethnic group predominates. In Peninsular Malaysia, 61.5% of the population are Malay and indigenous, 21% Chinese and 6.3% Indian. The population composition in Sarawak is quite different.

Sarawak Population by Ethnic Groups, 2016 ('000) (Projected)

Total Population	Malay	Iban	Bidayuh	Melanau	Other Bumiputera	Chinese	Others
2,580.0	629.0	785.9	215.1	139.8	175.8	618.3	16.2
Percentage: 100%	24.3%	30.5%	8.3%	5.4%	6.8%	24.0%	1%

Source: Statistics Yearbook Sarawak 2016, Department of Statistics, Malaysia, Sarawak, December 2017.

Sarawak population is comprised of 75.3% Bumiputera, 24% Chinese, and less than 1% Indian. Out of the 75.3% Bumiputera, only about 30% are Muslim, and about 44% are Christians.

The key political players are the Malay-Melanau, the Dayak (majority Iban, mainly Christian) and the Chinese. The Malay-Melanau and the Dayak are classified as Bumiputera. The current parties that make up the Sarawak BN coalition are Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB – Malay/Melanau), Sarawak United People’s Party (SUPP - Chinese), Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PR - Iban) and the Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP – Chinese/Iban/Bidayuh). Abang Johari has asked Sarawakians to vote for Sarawak BN to deny the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) an excuse to enter the state.

Where the opposition parties are concerned, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and the Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah) are members of Pakatan Harapan, while the Parti Islam seMalaysia (PAS) is under the Gagasan Sejahtera coalition.

Religious Freedom and Racial Harmony

The ethnic, religious and partisan divides that dominate Peninsular politics hold much less relevance in Sarawak, where race and religion issues have not been allowed to polarise society. Indeed, religion has not galvanized society, and structures of churches prominently coexist with beautiful mosques and temples around the Sarawak capital and its outskirts, as I noted in a recent trip to the East Malaysian state.²

The Sarawak government is well-known for promoting religious and racial harmony, and this is in accordance with the Malaysia Agreement of 1963. Indeed, the late Adenan Satem once remarked at a Dewan Undangan Negeri sitting that:

we have all the right to safeguard our unity by preventing racial and religious extremists from entering the state. I have said this in previous sittings and I will reiterate today and will continue to do so that I will not tolerate any racial or

religious bigots and extremists from disrupting our harmony and peace which have been our longstanding pride...

Racial and religious polarisation that is happening in Peninsular Malaysia right now is not healthy and I want to keep Sarawak out of all that, what I call “Cordon sanitaire”. I do not want extremists and religious bigots to come to Sarawak and spread their poison.³

Not known to many, however, is that Sarawak was the first state in Malaysia to implement a complete set of syariah laws. This happened during Taib Mahmud’s time. As Faisal Hazis remarked: “[t]his so-called milestone is even [more] remarkable considering Sarawak is not even a Malay state.”⁴ However Islam has not featured prominently in the state discourse for three reasons: an absence of influential Islamic movements that can contest the state’s official Islam, the need for Muslim Bumiputera leaders to accommodate the interests of its Dayak and Chinese communities, and the popularity of Malay nationalism that has superseded Islamic concerns.⁵

Abang Johari has continued Adenan Satem’s position of religious freedom in the state. For example in March 2018, he announced that the state should move towards amending its laws on conversion, and to provide a “standard operating procedure” that would allow individuals to have their conversion reversed. This announcement followed the dismissal of an appeal by three applicants to be heard in a civil court for a reversal in their conversion.⁶

WHAT FAVOURS BN IN 2018?

The Adenan Legacy

The late Adenan Satem portrayed himself as a different kind of leader: people-oriented, approachable and non-elitist. He was also seen as a reformist and a strong state leader. This formula, which proved to be crucial in securing political support from Sarawakians, is now being continued by Abang Johari who succeeded Adenan after his demise on 11 January 2017.⁷ Adenan Satem is still fondly remembered by Sarawakians, his achievements often “relived” during “ceramahs” or rallies.⁸ Sarawakians are expected to continue to support Abang Johari and BN in GE14.

Sarawak for Sarawakians

The Sarawak government has used regional nationalism to its fullest effect, with Adenan Satem promoting the cause of greater autonomy and empowerment for the state during his tenure. Adenan’s 53 Principles and Action published in 2016 reflected this independent stance very strongly. This included the reinstating English as the second official language in Sarawak, unlike in the rest of Malaysia where Malay is the only official language; allowing Christians in Sarawak to use the term “Allah” in their worship; not imposing restrictions on a Bahasa Malaysia bible in Sarawak; not recognizing Hudud law; increasing petroleum royalties; removing bridge tolls; recognising the independent Chinese school certificate (UEC); acknowledging that the ethnic Chinese in Sarawak are not ‘pendatang’ but are Sarawakians; ensuring that 90% of teachers in Sarawak are Sarawakians, by 2018;

and reinstating the rights of Sarawak mentioned in the Malaysia Agreement 1963, among others.

Abang Johari, like Adenan Satem, has reiterated that UMNO should not be allowed to operate in Sarawak, and has asked Sarawakians to vote for his BN coalition in GE14 to keep UMNO out. He will also continue to reclaim the full rights as enshrined in the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA 63) which guaranteed Sarawak a range of rights not enjoyed in other Malaysian states. In addition to Adenan's policies, Abang Johari has introduced initiatives to move Sarawak further up the development ladder through the adoption of digital technologies and a digital economy. Petros (Sarawak's own oil and gas agency) and the Development Bank of Sarawak (DBOS) are also among Abang Johari's other initiatives. Abang Johari also acquired the Bakun Dam from the Federal government to achieve cheaper energy prices for Sarawak.

The Politics of Developmentalism

The politics of developmentalism has also featured strongly in Sarawak. The Pan Borneo Highway running along the coastlines of Sabah, Sarawak, Brunei and Kalimantan, stretching from Telok Melano at the southwestern tip of Sarawak to Serudong in Sabah across Brunei represents progress for many. The highway stretches for 2,325 kilometres and is being built at a cost of almost RM30 billion. It is expected to be completed by 2023.

The Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE) is another such example. SCORE is one of the economic development corridors created by the Federal Government of Malaysia to stimulate investment-led growth in its traditionally rural areas. SCORE was undertaken to develop the central region of Sarawak and to transform it into a developed state by 2020. SCORE stretches for 320 km along the coast from Tanjung Manis to Similajau, extending into surrounding areas and the hinterland. The priority sectors here include palm oil, aluminium, steel, oil-based, timber based, livestock, aquaculture, marine industry and glass industries.

CHALLENGES REMAIN FOR THE RULING COALITION

The wide development gap between rural and urban areas may work against Sarawak BN's favour, where rural incomes are about 44 percent lower than urban income. Rural areas still remain very underdeveloped. Only about 60 percent of households in rural areas have access to piped water, and 51.2 percent of households are located more than 9 km away from the nearest secondary school. The GST is also regarded very unfavourably by Sarawakians. If native customary rights are not accorded greater attention as the palm oil industry expands into their territories, that may also work against BN. In November 2017, a protest rally was attended by more than 1,000 natives.

SEATS TO WATCH⁹

Interesting Seats to Watch for GE14:

Seat	Candidate/Party	Observation
Kuching	<p>GE14: Kho Teck Wan (BN-SUPP) Kelvin Yii Lee Wuen (DAP)</p> <p>In GE13 (2013): Chong Chieng Jen (PR-DAP) Incumbent 73.8% Tan Kai (BN-SUPP) 25.7%</p>	<p>New set of candidates, untested and untried. However as this is a DAP stronghold, Kelvin Yii should win especially with the supporting presence of Chong Cheing Jen and how well DAP is supported by the community in Kuching.</p>
Petra Jaya	<p>GE14: Fadillah Yusof (BN-PBB) Ir. Dr. Nor Irwan Ahmad Nor (PKR) Hamdan Sani (PAS)</p> <p>In GE13 (2013): Fadillah Yusof (BN-PBB) 77.8% Ahmad Nazib Johari (PR-PKR) 21.4%</p>	<p>Entry of Dr Nor Irwan may help to win votes for PKR. Dr Irwan is local from Petra Jaya; he is well-respected and has been working on the ground for awhile now. However, that may not be enough to displace Fadillah Yusof, who has enjoyed a strong majority in the last election and is also well-regarded. PAS has been working the ground, and this may dilute PH's voter base.</p>
Stampin	<p>GE14: Datuk Dr Sim Kui Hian (BN-SUPP) Chong Chieng Jen (PH-DAP)</p> <p>In GE13 (2013): Julian Tan Kok Ping (PR-DAP) Incumbent 63.7% Yong Khoo Seng (BN-SUPP) 35.2% Soo Lina (STAR) 0.2%</p>	<p>Battle of the titans. Both heavyweights, 50:50 chance. Datuk Sim is an elected member of the Sarawak State Legislative Assembly for Batu Kawa. Chong Chieng Jen is member of the Sarawak State Assembly for Kota Sentosa. If either loses, they will still have their state assembly seats to fall back on. DAP is very popular with the crowds in Stampin and also Kuching.¹⁰</p>
Selangau	<p>GE14: Baru Bian (PH-PKR) Rita Sarimah Insol (BN-PRS)</p> <p>In GE13 (2013): Joseph Entulu Belaun (BN-PRS) 58.1% Sng Chee Hua (SWP) 21.6% Joshua Anak Jabing @ Joshua Jabeng (PR-PKR) 18.8%</p>	<p>Both are new candidates. Rita Sarimah is a greenhorn, her husband is native to Selangau. She is Iban in an Iban-dominated constituency. Baru Bian is Lun Bawang from the highlands of Lawas in Limbang. He is an outsider but is a strong advocate and lawyer for native customary rights. Rita is also a lawyer and has been working the ground for the past 14 months. It is likely that Rita will win given the BN resources that are backing her</p>

Puncak Borneo (New Unknown)	<p>GE14: Genot Sibek @ Jeannoth Sinel (BN-PBB) Willie Mongin (PH-PKR) Buln Ribos (STAR)</p> <p>In GE13 (2013): Dr James Dawos Mamit (BN-PBB) 62.8% Willie Mongin (PR-PKR) 33.0% Dripin Sakoi (STAR) 2.2%</p>	Genot Sibek is a new face but is expected to win because of strong support from the PBB and its resources.
Lanang	<p>GE14: Alice Lau Kiong Yieng (PH-DAP) Kong Sien Chiu (BN-SUPP) Priscilla Lau (PEACE)</p> <p>In GE13 (2013): Alice Lau Kiong Yieng (PH-DAP) 59.3% Tiong Thai King (BN-SUPP) 40.1%</p>	Three-cornered fight that may favour BN-SUPP.

Marginal Seats:

Mas Gading	<p>GE14: Datuk Anthony Nogeh Gumbek (BN-PDP) Mordi Bimol (DAP)</p> <p>In GE13 (2013): Datuk Anthony Nogeh Gumbek (BN-PDP) Incumbent 40.6% Tiki Lafe (IND) 30% Mordi Bimol (PR-DAP) 26% Patrick Uren (STAR) 2.3%</p>	A threat of a four-cornered fight was here reduced to just two. With Tiki Lafe not contesting, Mordi Bimol may garner stronger support but not enough to displace Datuk Nogeh Anak Gumbek who has carried out many development initiatives for the constituency. Also, the BN resources behind campaign backing Gumbek is immense. ¹¹
Sarikei*	<p>GE14: Wong Ling Biu (PH-DAP) Huong Tiing Sii (BN-SUPP) Wong Chin King (PBK)</p> <p>In GE13 (2013): Wong Ling Biu (PR-DAP) 50.4% Ding Kuong Hiing (BN-SUPP) 48.6%</p>	A marginal opposition seat that can go either way, likely to favour SUPP given the popularity of the Sarawak BN.
Sibu*	<p>GE 14: Oscar Ling Chai Yew (PH-DAP) Andrew Wong Kee Yew (BN-SUPP) Tiong Ing Tung (STAR) Tiew Yen Houng (PEACE)</p> <p>In GE13 (2013):</p>	Four-cornered fight in a marginal seat belonging to the opposition. This seat may fall into the hands of the SUPP. SUPP has been effectively using its tagline “Sarawakian First” and “Stronger Sarawak” to remind Sarawakians they are a party based in the state.

	Oscar Ling Chai Yew (PR-DAP) 52.1% Lau Lee Ming (BN-SUPP) 46.6% Narawi Haron (IND) 0.4%	
Miri*	GE14: Michael Teo Yu Keng (PH) Sebastian Ting Chiew Yew (BN-SUPP) In GE 13 (2013): Michael Teo Yu Keng (PR-PKR) 51% Sebastian Ting Chiew Yew (BN-SUPP) 47.2% Chong Kon Fatt (STAR) 0.6%	Like Sibu, SUPP's emphasis on nationalism will work in its favour.
Baram*	GE14: Anyi Ngau (BN-PDP) Roland Engan (PH-PKR) In GE13 (2013): Anyi Ngau (BN-SPDP) 48.9% Roland Engan (PR-PKR) 47.9% Patrick Sibat Sujang (IND) 1.9%	A close fight between two candidates. However, the seat is unlikely to fall to opposition because of growing nationalistic sentiments and also BN's immense campaign resources.
Sri Aman*	GE14: Masir Kujat (BN-PRS) Norina Utot ((PH-PKR) In GE13 (2013): Masir Kujat (BN-PRS) 54.4% Nicholas Mujah Ason (PR-PKR) 25.1% Donald Lawan (IND) (17.3%) Wilfred Stephen (SWP) 2.1%	PRS is likely to retain this seat because Masir Kujat who has been working the ground and is already a two-term incumbent.
Lubok Antu*	GE14: Robert Pasang Alam (BN-PRS) Nicholas Bawin Anggat (PH-PKR) In GE 13 (2013): William Nyallau Badak (BN-PRS) 54.7% Larry Soon @ Larry Sng Wei Shien (SWP) 27.2% Nicholas Bawin Anggat (PR-PKR) 16.7%	Both are new faces. With just two candidates, this would be an interesting seat to watch. However, BN is expected to win as it has been paying attention to the needs of the community here. The reduction from a three-cornered to two-cornered will in this case work in BN's favour.
Saratok*	GE14: Subeng Mula (BN-PDP) Ali Biju ((PH-PKR) In GE13 (2013): William Ikom (BN-SPDP) 52.6% Ali Biju (PR-PKR) 43.2% Rosli Bin Lek (IND) 3.1%	This can go either way. As Subeng Mula is a new face, votes could swing to favour Ali Biju of PH.

CONCLUSION

In a very optimistic scenario for BN, it will lose four seats and win 27 parliamentary seats. The four seats lost will be Kuching, Stampin, Lanang and Saratok, and BN will win the marginal DAP seats of Sibü, Miri and Sarikei. In a less positive scenario, Sarawak BN may just win 24 seats, and lose 7 seats (Kuching, Stampin, Lanang, Saratok, Sibü, Miri and Sarikei). Given the positive impression of the current Sarawak BN party under Abang Johari, and its moves towards ensuring that it is working to reassert Sarawak's rights under MA63, it is likely that BN will win 27 if not more seats. Abang Johari has also very deftly played up the Sarawak for Sarawkians message to nudge Sarawakians to vote for Sarawak-based parties and not Peninsular ones.

¹ In the 12th General Elections in 2008, BN secured 140 of the 222 seats. This was the time when BN lost its two-thirds majority for the first time in fifty years. Sarawak contributed 30 out of 31 seats while Sabah contributed 24 seats. See James Chin, “Exporting the BN/UMNO Model: Politics in Sabah and Sarawak” in Meredith L. Weiss, editor, Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Malaysia. London and New York: Routledge, p. 89.

² This observation was made during my first field trip in early April 2018 when I travelled through Samaharan, Santubong, Petra Jaya and Bandar Kuching. My thanks to Mr Mohd. Shazani bin Masri at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak for helping me to understand the nuances in Sarawak politics and society.

³ “Adenan Gives Chong a Poser over Motion”, Borneo Post Online, 30 April 2015, <http://www.theborneopost.com/2015/04/30/adenan-gives-chong-a-poser-over-motion/>, Retrieved on 30 April 2018.

⁴ Faisal S. Hazis, “The Politics of Islam in Sarawak” in Faisal S. Hazis and Stanley Bye Kadam-Kiai, editors, Politics and Local Government in Sarawak. Sarawak: Penerbit Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 2013, p. 209.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁶ “Sarawak Chief Minister Pledges to Amend State Law to Allow Converts to Renounce Islam” The Straits Times, 4 March 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/sarawak-chief-minister-pledges-to-amend-state-laws-to-allow-converts-to-renounce-islam>; and “Sarawak Could Allow Converts to Renounce Islam” 5 March 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/sarawak-could-allow-converts-to-renounce-islam>. Both retrieved on 27 April 2018.

⁷ Meredith L. Weiss and Arnold Puyok, “The 2016 Sarawak State Election: Old Stories and New Punchlines” in Meredith L. Weiss and Arnold Puyok, editors, Electoral Dynamics in Sarawak: Contesting Developmentalism and Rights. Malaysia and Singapore: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre and ISEAS Publishing, 2017, p. 8.

⁸ Second fieldwork in Kuching, 3 to 7 May 2018.

⁹ Blue Denotes Pakatan Harapan. * denotes marginal seat of 55% or less.

¹⁰ Second fieldwork in Kuching, 3 to 7 May 2018.

¹¹ BN flags were populated throughout the whole township of Bau. *Ibid.*

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