

PERSPECTIVE

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Impressive Results Await BN in Sarawak State Elections

*By Lee Hock Guan**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Sarawak state elections will be won by the Barisan Nasional. The question is really, by how much.
- Taib Mahmud's successor as chief minister, Adenan Satem, has through various measures taken over the last two years, increased his personal popularity and the popularity of his party tremendously.
- While there have been disagreements within both the coalitions – Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Harapan (PH) – those within PH are most serious, and damage the credibility of its component parties even at the federal level. This may affect voter support in the general elections to be held within two years.
- As the situation now stands, the opposition parties have lost the initiative that they had in 2011, and are basically carrying out damage control measures. Retaining the same number of seats they won in 2011 will be their most realistic strategy.

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ETHNIC POLITICS WITHOUT UMNO

Much of what lies behind Sarawak’s political conditioning is in the fact that the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysia’s federally dominant party, has never established itself in this East Malaysian state where Malay voters constitute a minority.

Instead, UMNO, through the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition model in which it is the decisive voice, has strategically formed political pacts with parties representing Sarawak’s Muslim bumiputras, Christian bumiputra minorities and Chinese. That has been its winning formula in the state.

Since the 2006 state elections, the Sarawakian parties allying with UMNO are Parti Pesaka Bumiputra Bersatu (PBB), Sarawak United People’s Party (SUPP), Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS) and Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP). PBB, SUPP, PRS and SPDP will again join forces to contest in the 2016 state elections.

Unlike in West Malaysia where the ruling coalition component parties are all expressedly ethnic parties, in Sarawak the BN is an alliance of nominally multi-ethnic parties albeit each of the latter is usually dominated by one ethnicity. The PBB is a Malay-Melanau dominated party with significant Iban and, to a lesser extent, Bidayuh membership, while PRS is Iban dominated with noticeable Bidayuh and Orang Ulu membership. The SPDP’s membership comes from the Chinese, Iban and Bidayuh groups. SUPP is the exception in that it is a largely Chinese party. Similarly, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) Sarawak is Chinese-dominated but with sizable Iban, Bidayuh and Orang Ulu membership, and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) Sarawak’s members are made up of Chinese and non-Muslim bumiputras.

Importantly, through successive constituency delineation exercises, the Malay-Melanau dominated state government has through gerrymandering and malapportionment demarcated ethnically defined seats in favour of the BN component parties, especially the PBB. For the 2016 state elections, there are 28 Malay-Melanau majority seats (Table 1), or 32.4% of the total number of seats, even though they comprise not more than 30% of the population. Ibans, the largest ethnic group, make up 30% of the total population but there are only 23 Iban majority seats, or 28% of the total seats. For the Chinese, who make up 24.4% of the total population, there are only 15 Chinese majority seats—or 18.3% of the total seats.

Table 1: Constituencies grouped by ethnicity, 2016

<p>Malay/Melanau majority constituencies – 28 seats</p> <p>Tanjung Datu, Pantai Damai, Demak Laut, Tupong, Samariang, Satok, Asajaya, Muara Tuang, Sadong Jaya, Simunjan, Gedong, Sebuyau, Lingga, Beting Maro, Saribas, Kalaka, Kabong, Kuala Rajang (old name Belawai), Semop, Daro, Jemoreng, Nangka, Dalat, Tellian, Balingian, Jepak, Bukit Kota, Bukit Sari</p>
<p>Iban majority constituencies – 23 seats</p>

Balai Ringin, Bukit Begunan, Simanggang, Engkilili, Batang Ai (old name Batang Air), Layar, Bukit Saban, Krian, Pakan, Meluan, Ngemah, Machan, Tamin, Kakus, Pelagus, Katibas, <i>Bukit Goram (Selirik)</i> , Baleh, Kemena, <i>Samalaju</i> , Marudi, Batu Danau, <i>Stakan</i>
Bidayuh majority constituencies – 8 seats Opar, Tasik Biru, <i>Serembu</i> , Mambong (old name Bengoh), Tarat, Tebedu, Kedup, <i>Bukit Semuja (Triboh)</i>
Orang Ulu majority constituencies – 5 seats Belaga, <i>Murum</i> , Telang Usan, <i>Mulu (Long Lama)</i> , Ba'Kelalan
Chinese majority constituencies – 15 seats Padungan, Pending, Batu Lintang, Kota Sentosa, <i>Batu Kitang</i> , Batu Kawah, Repok, Meradong, Bukit Assek, Dudong, Bawang Assan, Pelawan, Tanjong Batu (Kidurong), Piasau, Pujut
Mixed seats – 3 seats Bekenu, Lambir, Senadin

Sources: various

Note: The 11 new seats are highlighted in italics and bold.

A FIGHT FOR THE POPULAR VOTE

What concerns the BN this time around is the memory that its share of the popular vote had declined from 64.2% in 2008 to 55.4% in 2011. Of course, fundamentally due to gerrymandering and malapportionment, the ruling coalition won 55 seats, or 77.5% of the seats at stake. Growing frustration with then-Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud, especially among the Chinese and, to a lesser extent, the non-Muslim bumiputras, resulted in the last state elections in the DAP and PKR making good headway and winning 12 and 3 seats respectively.

Of the BN parties, the PBB alone continued to enjoy staunch backing. All other BN component parties suffered a decline in support. The PBB won all the 35 seats it contested, while the Iban-dominated PRS lost 1 of 9 seats and the SPDP lost 2 of 8 seats. Most noteworthy was the case of the SUPP which lost 13 of the 19 seats that it contested. Large numbers of Chinese voted against the BN, in frustration over Taib Mahmud and his cronies' control of the state's economy; the alleged corruption of BN leaders; and the rising extremist racial and religious rhetoric exhorted by UMNO and some Malay Muslim groups federally. The latter might have been of major significance. The slight increase in support for the DAP and PKR from the Iban, Bidayuh and Orang Ulu groups may have been a response to the perceived state discrimination against Christians, especially over controversies involving

the import of Bibles and the controversy over the use of the word ‘Allah’; Ibans, Bidayus and Orang Ulu are mostly Christians.

Although the opposition managed in 2011 to win substantial support from non-Muslim bumiputras, that translated into only 3 seats for PKR. All the 12 seats won by DAP were Chinese-majority seats.

A POPULAR CM IN THE FOREFRONT

On 1 March 2014, about 10 months after the 2013 general elections, the very unpopular Taib relinquished the chief minister post. His successor Adenan Satem, who is also the president of PBB, has enjoyed a honeymoon period since taking over. Just as Abdullah Badawi did after becoming Malaysia’s prime minister in 2004, Adenan has made full use of public goodwill to make a number of right moves that has further increased his personal popularity and that of his administration.

Adenan embraced the opposition’s call "Sarawak for Sarawakians" by advocating more autonomy from the federal government and seeking more recognition for Sarawak. Reverting to the terms of the 20-Point Agreement attendant on the founding of Malaysia in 1963, he re-instated English as the state’s second official language. He has also demanded higher oil revenue to be retained by Sarawak. His backing for religious freedom and a robust stance against ethnic extremism and religious polarisation should gain him support from non-Muslims, especially the Christian bumiputras. To the Chinese, he announced that the state government will recognise the Independent Chinese Secondary School’s United Examination Certificate (UEC) and that UEC holders will be allowed to work in the state’s civil service and state legislative assembly. The refusal to grant such as status to the UEC has always been a sore point throughout Malaysia. Adenan also insisted that Chinese are fellow Malaysian citizens with equal rights and status and are not “pendatang” (sojourners).

Seeking to distance his administration from Taib’s authoritarian and adversarial actions toward the opposition and critics, Adenan has adopted a more inclusive and reconciliatory approach and engaged stakeholders from every level of society. He met up with some of the state government’s staunchest critics and personally met with villagers unhappy about the controversial Baram hydroelectric dam project. He also promoted good governance and transparency and put a freeze on the issuance of timber concession licences for 10 years and on the opening of new commercial oil palm plantations, in order to limit the destruction of the state’s forests.

Making the right moves, especially by co-opting the call for “Sarawak for Sarawakians”, has gained Adenan and his administration much approval from Sarawakians. In a survey conducted in late January 2016, the independent pollster Merdeka Center found that Adenan’s popularity rose from 74% in April 2015 to 81% in January 2016. Most significantly, the positive rating for Adenan came from all the ethnic groups surveyed—his approval rating from the Muslim bumiputra, non-Muslim bumiputra and Chinese were 90%, 85% and 71% respectively.

DISPUTES OVER SEAT ALLOCATION

In the 2011 state elections and 2013 general elections, component parties of the opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat (PR), managed to agree on a common electoral manifesto, pool their campaign resources and compromise on the allocation of seats. DAP, PKR and PAS thus avoided splitting their voter support and succeeded in vote pooling where, for example, the DAP helped PAS to win Chinese votes and PAS helped DAP to win Muslim votes.

However, shortly after the 2013 general elections, PR fell apart over a series of policy disputes, especially between DAP and PAS over the implementation of hudud laws in Kelantan. Subsequently, a group of moderates broke away from PAS to form a new party called Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah) which has now joined PKR and DAP to form a new coalition called Pakatan Harapan (PH). Yet, even though PKR and DAP are in a coalition, PKR and DAP in Sarawak have been unable to come together to pool their resources and adopt a common electoral manifesto – and most importantly compromise on the allocation of seats. Indeed, the latter has resulted in DAP and PKR pitting candidates against one another in six seats, namely Batu Kitang, Mulu, Murum, Mambong, Simanggang and Ngemah.

In the case of PAS, not long after the 2013 general elections the party has been on friendly terms with UMNO in particular between Najib Razak, Prime Minister and UMNO President, and Hadi Awang, PAS President. There is a general suspicion that PAS is acting as a spoiler for the BN in this Sarawak state elections. Thus, in all the 11 seats the party is contesting PAS is splitting the votes three ways by putting candidates against not only the BN candidate, but against those from PH parties—Amanah in Samariang, Muara Tuang, Sadong Jaya, Sebuyau, Beting Maro and Pantai Damai, PKR in Kakus, Jepak and Lambir, and DAP in Samalaju and Pujut.

Significantly, there are also seat allocation disputes on the BN side especially between SUPP and its splinter faction, the United People's Party (UPP); and between SPDP and its breakaway faction, the Sarawak People's Energy Party (TERAS). The UPP and TERAS have declared themselves BN friendly, and to resolve tension, Adenan used his power as the chief minister to appoint BN direct (BND) candidates for disputed seats. Of these, 7 are from UPP, 3 from TERAS, and 3 others who are expressly pro-PBB. However, the nomination of BND candidates have not been accepted by certain SUPP and TERAS leaders, especially those who were consequently denied the opportunity to contest in the election. These resigned from SUPP and TERAS and are running as independents in seats such as Bukit Semunja, Serembu, Mulu, Bawang Assan, Dudong, Opar, Engkilili, Bekenu, Pujut and Pakan.

PROJECTED ELECTION OUTCOME

Without a doubt, The BN led by Adenan will comfortably retain its two thirds majority. In fact, the question is whether the opposition can hold on to the 15 seats it won in the 2011 state elections. The BN component parties' share of the popular votes will most likely increase from 55.4% in 2011 to around the 60% mark in 2016. In particular, support for PBB from Malay Melanau voters is expected to be higher than even in the 2011 state

elections, while the BN coalition will probably win a higher percentage of the Iban, Bidayuh and Orang Ulu vote than before.

Table 2: Projected Election Outcome, 2016

Malay/Melanau majority constituencies – 28 seats Tanjung Datu, Pantai Damai, Demak Laut, Tupong, Samariang, Satok, Asajaya, Muara Tuang, Sadong Jaya, Simunjan, Gedong, Sebuyau, Lingga, Beting Maro, Saribas, Kalaka, Kabong, Kuala Rajang (old name Belawai), Semop, Daro, Jemoreng, Nangka, Dalat, Tellian, Balingian, Jepak, Bukit Kota, Bukit Sari		
Safe Seats PBB - 27	Fairly Safe Seats PBB - 1	Marginal Seats
Iban majority constituencies – 23 seats Balai Ringin, Bukit Begunan, Simanggang, Engkilili, Batang Ai (old name Batang Air), Layar, Bukit Saban, Krian, Pakan, Meluan, Ngemah, Machan, Tamin, Kakus, Pelagus, Katibas, Bukit Goram (Selirik), Baleh, Kemena, Samalaju, Marudi, Batu Danau, Stakan		
Safe Seats PBB – 4; PRS – 4; SPDP – 2; SUPP – 1; BND - 1	Fairly Safe Seats PBB- 3; PRS – 3; SPDP – 1; BND - 1	Marginal Seats Krian (PKR), Tamin (PRS), Salamaju (PRS)
Bidayuh majority constituencies – 8 seats Opar, Tasik Biru, Serembu, Mambong (old name Bengoh), Tarat, Tebedu, Kedup, Bukit Semuja (Triboh)		
Safe Seats PBB -1	Fairly Safe Seats PBB – 2; BND – 3	Marginal Seats Serembu (BND); Tasik Biru (SPDP)
Orang Ulu majority constituencies – 5 seats Belaga, Murum, Telang Usan, Mulu (Long Lama), Ba'Kelalan		
Safe Seats PRS - 1	Fairly Safe Seats PRS -1; BND -1	Marginal Seats Telang Usan (PBB); Ba'Kelalan (SPDP)
Chinese majority constituencies – 15 seats Padungan, Pending, Batu Lintang, Kota Sentosa, Batu Kitang, Batu Kawah, Repok, Meradong, Bukit Assek, Dudong, Bawang Assan, Pelawan, Tanjong Batu (Kidurong), Piasau, Pujut		
Safe Seats DAP – 6; PKR -1; BND - 1	Fairly Safe Seats DAP – 2; SUPP - 1	Marginal Seats Dudong (DAP); Piasau (SUPP); Batu Kawah

		(DAP); Batu Kitang (SUPP)
Mixed seats – 3 seats Bekenu, Lambir, Senadin		
Safe Seats	Fairly Safe Seats Bekenu (BND); Lambir (PBB)	Marginal Seats Senadin (SUPP)

Source: Author's Own Projections

In the 28 Malay-Melanau majority seats, PBB will most likely achieve a clean sweep with only the Beting Maro seat perhaps experiencing some competition. In the 2011 state election, PBB candidate Razali Gapor defeated PAS candidate Abang Ahmad Kerdee Abqng Masagus by a 391-vote majority or a 6.7% margin in Beting Maro. In 2016, the incumbent Razali Gapor will probably retain the seat as two opposition parties PAS and Amanah are contesting in Beting Maro. Furthermore, PAS and Amanah will also be opposing each other in five other Malay Melanau majority seats, namely; Samariang, Muara Tuang, Sadong Jaya, Sebuyau, and Pantai Damai.

In the Iban-majority seats, among the opposition parties the PKR may be able to retain Krian, the seat won by its candidate Ali Biju in 2011. Tamin may be another closely contested seat with the BN direct candidate going against PKR and the independent candidate Ali Puji who was previously with PRS. PRS will probably win Ngemah and SUPP win Simanggang because the opposition votes will be split between PKR and DAP candidates.

Of the 8 Bidayuh majority seats, only the Serembu and Tasik Biru seats are marginal ones for BN. A BND candidate is contesting against a PKR candidate, a State Reform Party (STAR) candidate and an influential independent candidate Nyomek Nyeap. Tasik Biru will see the incumbent candidate contesting as a BND candidate against DAP's Mordi Bimo. Both Serembu and Tasik Biru will probably be won by BN.

PKR may not be able to hold on to the Ba'Kelalan seat, and even with land rights issues and the controversy over the Baram dam in Teluk Usan, PBB will probably win the latter seat. Both DAP and PKR are vying in Murum, which will benefit the PRS candidate. Similarly, the Mulu seat BND candidate will benefit from opposing votes being divided between DAP, PKR and an independent (former SPDP). The SUPP incumbent Lee Kim Shin (SUPP) will probably retain Senadin while Lambir will remain with PBB as dissenting votes there will be fragmented by the presence of candidates from PAS and PKR. Rosey Yunus, the Bekenu incumbent, is contesting as a BND candidate and stands a good chance of retaining her seat. The Dudong DAP candidate stands a good chance of retaining his seat, as votes in support of the BN could be split between BND candidate Tiong Thai King and Benny Lee (former SUPP Dudong branch vice-chairman). Similarly, Batu Kawah's incumbent, Christina Chiew, should benefit from a split in the support for BN between SUPP and independent candidate Liu Thian Leong, the branch chairman of UPP. For Piasau, the SUPP may be successful in winning back the seat from DAP. The new seat Batu Kitang will likely go to

SUPP's Lo Khere Chiang as DAP and PKR are both contesting in this seat. DAP may spring a surprise in Bawang Assan as the incumbent Wong Soon Koh running as a BND candidate may lose crucial Chinese and Iban support to two independent candidates.

CONCLUSION

The BN will perform better in the 2016 state elections than in 2011 and thus reverse the declining popular support for the coalition that had been obvious during the last two terms of Taib Mahmud as chief minister. Taib's retirement as chief minister, combined with the successful strategy adopted by his successor Adenan Satem has helped raise the popularity of the BN. However, while Adenan's approval rating among the Chinese is high, this may not translate into votes for the BN as the community remains dissatisfied with many shown by the split between SUPP and UPP.

On the other hand, the split in the opposition especially between DAP and PKR should affect the outcome of several marginal seats. Nevertheless, given the current popularity of the Adenan administration, it may not really matter in that even if they had remain united it may only have won them one or at most, two more seats.

The PBB can win all the 40 seats it is contesting and will the three pro-PBB BN direct candidates. In other words, PBB alone can form the next state government with a simple majority. In total, the BN can probably win between 69 and 72 seats while the opposition can win between 10 and 13 seats.

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