

PERSPECTIVE

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Adenan Will Win Big in Sarawak State Election, but Long-Term Effects on Malaysian Politics are Unclear

By **Faisal S. Hazis**¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- BN is set to win a two-third majority in the state election in Sarawak on 7 May, but faces difficulties in achieving its more optimistic target of 70 seats
- The Opposition, in turn, should win between 10 and 16 seats. This is because the popularity of Chief Minister Adenan Satem is effectively overrated and may not translate easily into support for the Barisan Nasional
- What a victory for Adenan in Sarawak means for the general elections due within two years is uncertain. In the end, what may be decisive is whatever benefits Sarawak most.
- As kingmaker, Sarawak can potentially reshape Malaysian politics in coming years.

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INTRODUCTION

About 1.14 million Sarawakians will head to the polling booth on 7 May 2016 for the 11th Sarawak state elections. A total of 80 seats are up for grabs between the incumbent Barisan Nasional (BN) and the fragmented opposition parties. More than half the seats will see multi-cornered fights between opposition parties. Furthermore, the seats of Bukit Kota and Bukit Sari have already been won uncontested by the BN when a Democratic Action Party (DAP) and a Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) candidate respectively failed to show up on nomination day.

Contesting Parties in the 2016 Sarawak Elections

	Seats Contested
Barisan Nasional (BN)	82
BN Direct	13
Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB)	40
Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP)	13
Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS)	11
Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP)	5
Pakatan Harapan (PH)	84
Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)	40
Democratic Action Party (DAP)	31
Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah)	13
Other Opposition Parties and Candidates	62
Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS)	11
State Reform Party (STAR)	11
Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak Baru (PBDSB)	5
Independents	35
Total candidates	228

In the 2011 elections, the BN won 55 seats while the opposition captured 16 seats (DAP 12, PKR 3, Independent 1), which was the biggest haul for the opposition since the 1987 elections. Sarawak BN, now under the stewardship of Chief Minister Adenan Satem, aims to consolidate its electoral dominance by increasing BN's popular vote and capturing the lost seats in 2011.

THE BACKDROP

Before analyzing the points presented above, let us look at the backdrop of the 2016 Sarawak elections. After the 2015 delineation exercise, Sarawak has 82 state seats; an increase of eleven seats since the 2011 state elections.

Sarawak state is huge. The parliamentary seat of Hulu Rajang, which comprises of the three state seats of Murum, Belaga and Baleh is as big as the state of Pahang which has 42 state seats. Due to its size alone, the incumbent government has a great advantage in the elections.

Another important point is the plurality of Sarawak's electorate. There is no single ethnic group that forms the majority in the state. As many as 28 of the seats are Malay/Melanau majority seats, 22 Iban, 16 Chinese, 7 Bidayuh, 5 Orang Ulu and 4 mixed seats. Clearly, the Malay/Melanaus are overrepresented in the state assembly since the community makes up

only 28 percent of the population. Whereas the Ibans, Bidayus and Orang Ulus are proportionately represented, while the Chinese are under-represented. The Chinese population in Sarawak is about 23 percent. They were once the second largest ethnic group but now they are third after Iban and Malay/Melanau.

In 2011, the BN did not enjoy super majority votes despite successfully defending its traditional two-third majority in the state assembly. The ruling party only managed to poll 55.4 percent of the popular vote. In fact, support for the ruling party had declined significantly from 71 percent in 2001 to 63 percent in 2006 and 55.4 percent in 2011; a staggering 15.8 percentage-point decline over two elections. Understandably, the goal of the BN in the 2016 elections is to consolidate its electoral dominance by capturing the opposition seats and increasing its popular vote.

Based on the 2011 results, the BN has strong support (more than 60 percent) in 45 seats, just 10 seats short of a two-third majority. The opposition in turn enjoys a commanding support in 11 seats which are all Chinese seats except for Krian and Bukit Goram. Nine seats recorded 40-49 percent votes for BN, and in the remaining seats, BN support is between 50-59 percent.

The ruling party thus needs to win only 10 more seats to secure a two-third majority, and 25 more seats to achieve Adenan's 70 seats target. The first target is highly possible but the second one is not.

KEY FACTORS FOR THE BN

The ability of the ruling party to achieve its 70 seats target depends on several key factors.

1. Adenan

Adenan's popularity has increased significantly from 74 percent in April 2015 to 81 percent in January 2016 (based on a Merdeka Center survey). The new Chief Minister is very popular among all ethnic groups including the Chinese. This factor alone should help BN perform better in the 2016 elections. There are several reasons why Adenan is popular. First, he succeeded a very unpopular chief minister. Second, he projects an image of an inclusive and people-centred leader; a dying breed in Malaysia. Third, he is revered for standing up to federal leaders. And finally, he had made as many as 53 populist decisions that most Sarawakians can relate to. Examples of these are him pushing for full autonomy, abolishing tolls, getting rid of illegal logging and initiating the construction of the Pan-Borneo highway.

Historically, the change of a Chief Minister would result in a vote swing towards the ruling party. In the 1983 Sarawak state election, the BN led by its new Chief Minister then, Taib Mahmud, managed to increase its popular vote by more than 7 percentage points. And in the 1974 election which was Rahman Yakub's first election as Chief Minister, the BN's popular vote went up by 16 percentage points.

However, Adenan's popularity has its limits. In fact, I will argue that his popularity is overrated. In the Merdeka Centre survey released in January 2016, 56 percent Sarawakians say that they still needed a stronger opposition. The majority who support Adenan's leadership say that they still need a stronger opposition. The need to have a stronger opposition is felt most strongly among the Chinese, with 74 percent of them saying as much. This raises the question whether Adenan's popularity has reliable traction among Chinese voters.

Although 81 percent Sarawakians endorse Adenan's leadership, not all of them will vote for BN. This is what I meant by overrated. Adenan's popularity will surely help BN win more seats but it would give it a clean sweep.

2. Autonomy

The second key electoral dynamic that will bolster BN's chance of winning 70 seats is the play on the issues of autonomy and Sarawak nationalism. Adenan has cleverly hijacked the opposition's main campaign agenda, i.e. more autonomy for Sarawak. Ironically, the Sarawak opposition been championing this cause in almost every election since 1999. Adenan cleverly took up this issue right after he took office in 2014.

By evoking the sentiment of Sarawak nationalism, Adnan aims to kill two 'enemies' with one bullet: the national opposition which presents the biggest challenge in the 2016 elections, and UMNO, the biggest challenge within the ruling Sarawak BN coalition. Adenan's narrative of autonomy is also different from that of the opposition. He is not merely pushing to restore the 20 or 18 points which is the short term goal of his autonomy plan but is demanding for full autonomy in which the Federal Government will only have power over defence, internal security and foreign affairs. This is in line with the spirit of the Malaysia Agreement 1963.

But the call for greater autonomy does not necessarily translate into votes for BN since bread and butter issues tend to be far more important to the electorate. Then again, the call for autonomy is aimed at pulling the rug from under the opposition, leaving them without any convincing narrative to sell to voters.

3. Patronage

Patronage is the key feature of Sarawak politics. In every election, promises of new development projects and the implementation of flash projects (projek kilat) help to bind the electorate under the patronage of the ruling party. The politicization of development creates the perception that only the BN can bring about development. The politics of development has a great impact on voters in rural territories since development is far from satisfactory in those areas. Rural voters thus continue to form BN's backbone support.

In the 2016 elections, the promise of development projects and various monetary disbursements remain the BN's key campaign strategy. This is in line with the state government's plan to spend close to RM6 billion for development in 2016.

Significant allocations are being spent during the 2016 campaign period. On top of that, the federal government is also disbursing many projects especially in seats that will see close contests. This strategy should be far more effective in luring voters to the BN especially in opposition seats than Adenan's popularity and the call for greater autonomy.

4. Machinery

With its huge size, Sarawak poses a great challenge to parties and candidates without organized and big campaign machinery. The BN has a superior party machinery compared to the opposition. On top of that, the BN is also supported by federal and state government machineries in reaching out to more than 5,000 villages across the state. This is something that the opposition could not match outside of urban areas.

BN's prowess, however, is not absolute. It has many shortcomings that can cost them a number of seats. There is friction among BN component parties, especially between UPP and SUPP, and TERAS and SPDP. In the seat distribution for the 2016 elections, SUPP lost 7 seats to UPP while SPDP lost 3 seats to TERAS. The 10 seats have instead been allocated to BN direct candidates while three extra direct candidates are actually from the dominant PBB. This creates animosity among the parties and also between Adenan and SUPP/SPDP. Apart from that, Adenan's selection of candidates for the 2016 elections also caused friction among aspiring candidates who were bypassed. This animosity is manifested in the emergence of independent candidates who had once been closely aligned to the BN. Some of the independent candidates have huge resources as evident from their campaigns so far. They can potentially split BN votes, thus giving an advantage to the opposition.

Another big challenge for the BN, especially in urban areas, is the reputation of Prime Minister Najib Razak and the sorry state of the national economy. Usually, national issues and leaders do not feature prominently in Sarawak elections. However, the scandals surrounding Najib and the ailing national economy pose a problem to the BN in marginal seats where a swing of 4-5 percent vote is enough to give the seats to the opposition. So the key strategy of the opposition is to link voting for BN to Najib. Furthermore, the national economy especially the impact of GST on Sarawak voters may dilute Adenan's popularity.

THE ALTERNATIVES

The opposition was successful in winning more seats in the 2006 and 2011 Sarawak state elections because they were able to put up a united front, thus ensuring straight fights in almost all seats. But in the 2016 elections, the opposition is badly fragmented. On one side, they have Pakatan Harapan (PKR, DAP and Amanah) with its two major parties, DAP and PKR, locking horns in six seats. Then, there is PAS which will be facing Amanah in five seats, PKR in three seats and DAP in two seats. Plus, there are two other local opposition parties, STAR and PBDS Baru, that make the 2016 elections a very crowded affair. In the 2013 elections, the Sarawak opposition lost four seats due to multi-cornered fights between national and local opposition parties and candidates. However, in the 2016 election, the opposition managed to ensure straight fights in most of the marginal seats where they can

potentially win, except for Batu Kitang and Mulu. So despite the fragmentation, the opposition parties can still give the ruling party a good fight.

Another problem with the opposition is their lack of an alternative narrative. The DAP continues to use the slogan Ubah (change) although the party is not pushing for a change of government since there has already been a change of Chief Minister. PKR, on the other hand, has no coherent agenda. It still focuses on local issues such as Native Customary Rights (NCR) land and autonomy. But based on the campaign so far, the opposition seems to have a strong focus, i.e. GST and the need for a stronger opposition. They are also harping on Najib's federal leadership and the many allegations of scandals surrounding him.

Despite many shortcomings, the opposition can still pose a big problem for the BN because there are lingering problems that Adenan has yet to resolve. Among the problems are inflation, unemployment, urban-rural divide, poverty, poor public infrastructure, corruption, abuse of power, pro-elite development projects and land-grabbing. These issues feature in the opposition campaign and can increase opposition's seat tally.

POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

So what are the possible scenarios for both the BN and the opposition in the 2016 elections?

First, the opposition wins only 10 seats which are all Chinese majority seats (Padungan, Pending, Batu Lintang, Repok, Meradong, Bukit Assek, Pelawan, Tanjung Batu and Pujut) except for Krian. Although Bukit Goram recorded more than 60 percent opposition votes in 2011, the seat could go to the BN due to Larry Sng's decision not to contest there. He and his family played a crucial role in winning Pelagus (Bukit Goram is a new seat being carved out from Pelagus) in 2011. Meradong is another seat in which the DAP polled more than 60 percent votes in 2011 but the semi-rural seat is under serious threat due to the aggressive campaign by the BN candidate and the criticisms against the DAP incumbent for her failure to serve the constituency. In this first scenario, the opposition suffers a big loss due to the impact of Adenan's popularity, the rising sentiment of Sarawak nationalism, the effect of patronage and the containment of BN schism.

But, I think the opposition should get more than 10 seats which brings us to the second scenario.

The second scenario portrays the limits of Adenan's popularity and the limited effect of the call for greater autonomy. Furthermore, splits among the BN parties hamper the ruling party and the opposition snatches a few more seats from 14 marginal seats. Based on the campaign so far, the opposition can retain Batu Kawa, Piasau, Dudong and Ba'kelalan. Apart from that, the opposition can also wrest control of Telang Usan and make a few surprises in the rest of the seats. In short, the opposition can win 14 to 16 seats. This will be a daunting feat but it shows how highly contested the elections in Sarawak have been despite BN's continued grip over the state.

POST-TAIB SARAWAK IN THE CONTEXT OF MALAYSIA

After the 2008 general elections, Sarawak stopped being just a footnote in Malaysian politics. It can now play a major role in shaping national politics. Since federal leaders on all sides are now very much dependent on support from Sarawak, Adenan can easily play the role of a kingmaker. If his main priority continues to be to push for full autonomy, Malaysian federalism will definitely be reshaped. We may then see a shift from a centralized federal system to a more decentralized federal system.

However, devolution of power as a result of power brokering among political elites will not necessarily benefit the masses. Sarawak has relatively high autonomy compared to other states in Malaysia and yet Sarawak BN elites and cronies have benefitted more compared to the masses. Much has been written about Sarawak's timber politics and its crony economy. Suffice it to say that Sarawak BN elites are partially guilty to many problems that Sarawak is now facing. Another good example where increased autonomy in certain areas will not necessarily bring benefit to ordinary people is that of Native Customary Rights (NCR) land. There are currently over 300 NCR land cases pending in the High Court. This is a manifestation of the state government's refusal to accept the concept of NCR land. In fact, 10 cases have gone against the state government in court and yet the state government refuses to recognize the court ruling that pemakai menoa (territorial domain) and pulau galau (communal forest reserves) are also part of NCR. The state government only recognizes temuda land (farmed land). Sarawak still has serious structural problems (elite capture, crony economy, weak institutions, the lack of rule of law) such that with more power, local strongmen may become more powerful at the expense of the people.

Adenan and BN Sarawak's continued grip over the state does not mean that BN's control over federal power is guaranteed. Malaysian politics has become very fluid in the last few years. The fact that ex-Premier Mahathir Mohamed can now collaborate so closely with DAP leader Lim Kit Siang says a lot about the evolving situation. It should not be too big a surprise if Adenan (and even Sabah) should work with the opposition pact, Pakatan Harapan in the next general election. To him, whoever is able to give the best deal for Sarawak will get the support of Sarawak's Members of Parliament.

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