

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS-YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 31 March 2017

All Signs Point to Sarawak being ‘Fixed Deposit’ for BN in GE14

Lee Hock Guan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The new Chief Minister for Sarawak, Abang Johari Openg, has been closely continuing his popular predecessor’s policies and actions, most of which had enjoyed widespread support from all ethnic groups in the East Malaysian state.
- Abang Johari also portrays himself as a leader for all ethnicities in the state and intends to uphold the ‘Sarawak for Sarawakians’ objective.
- He is staying focused on major issues such as Chinese schools, native customary land rights, ethno-religious ties, infrastructure building, rural development, corruption and the state bureaucracy, business opportunities, and the deployment of teachers from outside of Sarawak.
- The Barisan Nasional (BN), the ruling federal coalition that his party, Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) is part of, will most likely win 30 of the 31 parliamentary seats contested in Sarawak in the coming general elections. The opposition is expected to win only in the Chinese-majority Bandar Kuching seat.

** Lee Hock Guan is a Senior Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.*

INTRODUCTION

Sarawak's status as a 'fixed deposit' for the Barisan Nasional (BN) was shaken in the 2011 state election and the 2013 parliamentary election. In 2013, its local ally, the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) lost all the six Chinese-majority seats to the opposition, five to the Democratic Action party (DAP) and one to Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). Then-Chief Minister (CM) Taib Mahmud's refusal to step down and his abuse of power and involvement in corruption scandals had caused much resentment among the Chinese. Support for him from the indigenous communities remained solid though. Other factors that negatively impacted BN's electoral support in the state included loss of state rights to Putrajaya; rising cost of living; lack of development; lack of religious freedom; and lack of support for Chinese education.

Taib's successor, the late Adenan Satem (1944-2017), became CM in 2014. He managed to receive widespread support across all ethnic groups. Adenan astutely consolidated his power base and, more importantly, conceived and implemented major policies and actions that went down well with the populace. His rising popularity resulted in the BN winning 72 of 82 seats in the 2016 state election, where there was a significant Chinese vote swing back to the BN. After Adenan's untimely death on 11 January 2017, Abang Johari Openg became the CM and he wisely declared that he would continue with the popular policies and actions initiated by his predecessor. Indeed, Abang Johari has followed closely Adenan's playbook, and this is bound to ensure that the support garnered by BN in the 2016 state election will persist in the 14th General Election (GE14).

POLITICAL CONSOLIDATION

Abang Johari's appointment as CM meant that he also automatically became the president of Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB). In 1998, Abang Johari was PBB's second highest ranked leader and would have succeeded Taib Mahmud if not for the latter's intervention in anointing Adenan as his successor.¹ Hence, Abang Johari's ascension to being CM and PBB president in 2017 received widespread support from both the PBB's Bumiputera and Pesaka wings.² He furthermore enhanced his position by promoting the PBB's two senior vice-presidents Douglas Uggah Embas, from the Pesaka wing, and Awang Tengah Ali Hassan, from the Bumiputera wing, to acting deputy presidents. Both are expected to be elected as deputy presidents at the party convention in April 2018.

While Abang Johari did not make any changes to the cabinet, he did take some steps to consolidate his position. He retained Douglas Uggah and James Masing, president of Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS), as DCMs, but opted to leave vacant the third DCM post traditionally reserved for the president of SUPP, a Chinese. This is probably because he did not want to offend his Chinese allies who remain split into two parties, namely the SUPP and the United

¹ In the 1998 PBB elections, Abang Johari defeated Adenan and Abang Abu Bakar to become the party's deputy president. However, instead of appointing Abang Johari to be the DCM, Taib Mahmud opted for Adenan. Subsequently, when Adenan became CM in 2014 he pragmatically appointed Abang Johari as one of the 3 DCMs.

² PBB was formed in 1973 when the Malay-Melanau party Parti Bumiputera (Bumiputera) merged with the Iban-Bidayuh party Parti Pesaka Anak Sarawak (Pesaka).

People's Party (UPP). The latter, established in 2014, is composed of a SUPP breakaway faction after SUPP suffered defeat in all the six Chinese majority seats it contested for in 2013. The UPP officially joined BN in 2016.

Abang Johari's decision to further add Adenan's Finance and Economic Planning Ministry and Resource Planning and Environment Ministry to the Housing and Urbanisation and Tourism and Arts and Culture portfolios that he already held did not go down well with his Sarawakian BN allies. By holding the CM and four ministerial posts, Abang Johari has consolidated his power further, and he now controls extensive resources to bolster his patronage network and to shore up popular support.

SARAWAK FOR SARAWAKIANS

After its poor showing in West Malaysia in the 2013 general election, BN has become even more dependent on its Sarawakian and Sabahan allies to remain in power. Sabah (22 seats) and Sarawak (25 seats) contributed 47 seats accounting for 35% of the total 133 parliamentary seats BN won in 2013. As the state became more vital to BN, it emboldened Sarawakian leaders to demand for more of the rights stipulated in the 18 Points Agreement that accompanied Sarawak's decision to join in the forming of Malaysia in 1963. Following Adenan's appropriation of civil society's 'Sarawak for Sarawakians' slogan and the opposition call for more autonomy, Abang Johari reiterated that he will continue to fight for the devolution of power from the federal government to the state, specifically through realising the 53 "principles and actions" meant to safeguard the interests of Sarawak.

Abang Johari has declared that he will pursue Adenan's objective to push Putrajaya to increase the state's share of oil and gas royalty from 5% to 20%. However, recognizing that it may be difficult for Putrajaya to grant the 20% given the lower price regime of petroleum in the foreseeable future, he proposed that Sarawakians be granted more opportunities to exploit the small marginal fields of oil and gas reserves, as well as participation in both upstream and downstream activities in the oil and gas sector.³ He also pressed Petronas to give preferential hiring to qualified Sarawakians and also to retain Sarawakian employees in Petronas in the event the company has to downsize.

In a surprise move, Abang Johari also announced the state's acquisition of the controversial Bakun Dam from the federal government at a cost of RM2.5 billion.⁴ He claimed that with complete control of the Bakun Dam, the state would, besides having control over the usage of the generated power, have the freedom to develop the region especially for tourism purposes and also provide employment to those residing in the region. Furthermore, Sarawakians can also expect to pay the lowest electric tariff rates in the country.

Despite intense opposition from Malay language activists, Abang Johari also persisted with Adenan's policy of reinstating English as the state's second official language and in inter-departmental correspondence in the state. He pointed out that mastering English has several advantages as it is a global language and, in fact, he also wanted Sarawakians to master

³ 'State to tap marginal oilfields', Karen Bong, Borneo Post Online, March 1, 2017, Wednesday.

⁴ This move raised the question whether it is economically a good buy. Besides the paying 2.5 billion the state has to take over the debts the company had incurred.

Mandarin in view of China's rising economic power. The "borneo-ization" i.e. staffing of Sarawakians in the state civil service will be pursued, in particular towards the 90:10 ratio of local teachers in the education sector in Sarawak. Still, because of a shortage of religious teachers in the state, Mahdzir Khalid, the Minister of Education, has claimed that the CM has agreed to import non-Sarawakian religious teachers from Sabah and West Malaysia to teach Islamic studies.⁵ Opposition parties as well as a number of non-Muslim Bumiputera and Chinese leaders in BN are against this move.

POPULAR POLICIES AND PATRONAGE

Adenan's intention to create a transparent and clean bureaucracy was also taken up by the new CM. To demonstrate that he is serious about making the state administration more transparent and unhampered by corrupt practices and abuse of power, Abang Johari led nine state Cabinet ministers and 18 assistant ministers in taking and ceremonially signing a pledge to be free of corruption in a pledge-taking ceremony.⁶

Abang Johari also assured the Chinese that the state government will recognise the United Examination Certificate's (UEC). The move enables Sarawakians with this qualification to join the state civil service and also to obtain education loans from the Sarawak Foundation. He also promised to provide financial aid to Chinese schools and has declared that his administration will be providing an additional RM1 million for this purpose on top of the RM6 million financial aid allocated by Adenan to Chinese schools. Abang Johari also pointed out that Chinese schools are not exclusively for the Chinese community and they in fact also cater to bumiputera students, giving the example of a Chinese school in his constituency of Satok where many of the students enrolled are Malays. Moreover, the CM announced that the state government has agreed to swap the 2,000-hectare land allocated to the Sarawak Private Chinese Secondary Schools Charitable Trust with a piece of land that has more economic value.

Abang Johari also declared that the state government will promote the use of Mandarin in its drive to establish better Sarawak-China ties and to attract Chinese tourism and business. In fact, he wants the state government to regard Mandarin to be of equal importance to English and Bahasa Malaysia in order to attract China businesses and government-linked companies to invest in the state; he estimated a total investment of RM32 billion to come from this source. He added that there are plans to promote the use of the Chinese language at schools, institutions of higher learning as well as the work place.⁷

When Abang Johari announced the issuance of short-term timber licences, it appeared that he was deviating from Adenan's policy to freeze the issuing of timber licenses. Abang

⁵ <http://www.theborneopost.com/2017/02/15/non-sarawakian-religious-teachers-will-be-brought-in-mahdzir/>

⁶ Read more at <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2017/01/25/sarawak-cabinet-ministers-take-pledge-to-be-corruption-free/#4aDt5ibGXXzoB8Om.99>

⁷ See <http://www.thestar.com.my/metro/community/2017/02/06/promoting-mandarin-for-business-sarawak-wants-language-to-be-learnt-as-china-investments-grow-in-sta/#XDtZCRg4msgJ4SKK.99>

Johari clarified however that the short-term timber licenses are only for state land forests that had been approved for development and native customary land development area and native communal reserve already earmarked for development.⁸ On 26 January 2017, indigenous land rights suffered a major setback when the Federal Court rejected the approach previously taken by lower courts and ruled that indigenous people have no title claim over foraging lands.⁹ The BN's political support may be adversely affected by a backlash to this decision, especially in areas where there are indigenous land rights claims. In response, Abang Johari gave his assurance that the state government will continue to defend native customary rights (NCR) land, and he established the Pemakai Menoa and Pulau Galau Committee (PMPG Committee) to ensure that land issues involving these two categories of NCR land can be solved amicably. DCM Douglas Uggah is to chair this committee.¹⁰

In response to various concerns felt by the Christian community, which constitutes the largest religious group in Sarawak, the state established the Non-Islamic Affairs Unit, which is the first of its kind in Malaysia, under DCM Douglas Uggah. Abang Johari also reiterated that Sarawak BN is against the Islamist PAS' president Hadi Awang's Private Member's Bill seeking to amend the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965 (Act 355), or better known as RUU 355, and that if it is tabled in Parliament, Sarawak BN will vote against it.¹¹

In an unambiguous move to win support, especially in rural areas, Abang Johari announced that the state government will provide each BN state constituency with RM5 million annually as part of the five-year development fund that comes under the Rural Transformation Projects (RTP) initiated by Adenan Satem.¹² Furthermore, BN Members of Parliament (MPs) will have access to the Project Mesra Rakyat (PMR) fund worth about RM6 million to carry out projects in their constituencies. In rural constituencies, BN state assemblymen and MPs can spend on many small projects which can bring them significant support.

GE14 OUTCOME IN SARAWAK

The coming parliamentary election should see Abang Johari's duplicating of Adenan's popular policies gaining the kind of support that Adenan received in the state election. This should be especially true with regards to Chinese voters who essentially abandoned the SUPP in GE13. In the 2016 state election, the BN successfully won eight of the 16 Chinese majority seats; retaining Bawang Assan and Senadin, winning the new seat of Batu Kitang,

⁸ <http://www.thestar.com.my/metro/community/2017/02/18/finetuning-timber-licences-state-uses-open-tenders-to-keep-logging-under-close-watch/>

⁹ <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/malaysian-courts-decision-sets-back-indigenous-land-rights-20170127-gtzzra.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.theborneopost.com/2017/02/08/uggah-heads-pemakai-menoa-pulau-galau-committee/>

¹¹ <http://www.malaysianchinesenews.com/2017/03/abang-johari-informed-pm-that-sarawak-bn-opposes-ruu-355/>

¹² <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2017/03/20/sarawak-cm-rm5-million-development-fund-for-bn-reps-only/>

and wresting back from the DAP, Batu Kawah, Repok, Meradong, Dudong and Piasau. Moreover, the SUPP and UPP also managed to reduced significantly the majority of the seats they lost to the DAP (Padungan, Pending, Kota Sentosa, Bukit Assek, Pelawan, Tanjong Batu and Pujut) and to PKR (Batu Lintang).

Table 1: Constituencies by ethnicity and won by parties, 2013

Muslim Bumiputera majority constituencies: 9 seats	
PBB	Santubong, Petra Jaya, Kota Samarahan, Batong Sadong, Batang Lupar, Betong, Kuala Rajang (Tanjung Manis), Igan, Mukah
Non-Muslim Bumiputeras: 11 seats	
PBB	Mambong, Serian, Kapit
SPDP	<i>Mas Gading, Baram</i>
PRS	Sri Aman, Lubok Antu, Julau, Kanowit, Selangau, Hulu Rajang
Chinese majority constituencies: 6 seats	
DAP	Bandar Kuching, Stampin, <i>Sarikei, Lanang, Sib</i>
PKR	<i>Miri</i>
Mixed seats: 5 seats	
PBB	Limbang, Lawas, Sibuti
SPDP	<i>Saratok, Bintulu</i>

Note: Italics denotes marginal seat where a constituency is won by a small majority

The PBB is essentially assured of retaining all the 15 seats it won in GE13; Nine Muslim Bumiputera majority seats (Santubong, Petra Jaya, Kota Samarahan, Batong Sadong, Batang Lupar, Betong, Kuala Rajang, Igan, Mukah); three non-Muslim Bumiputera majority seats (Serian, Mambong, Kapit); and three mixed seats (Limbang, Lawas, Sibuti). Similarly, the PRS is assured of retaining all the six non-Muslim Bumiputera majority seats it won in 2013; Sri Aman, Lubok Antu, Julau, Kanowit, Selangau, and Hulu Rajang.

There are only six marginal seats in the 2013 general election; two non-Muslim Bumiputera seats (Mas Gading, Baram), one mixed seat (Saratok), and three Chinese majority seats (Sarikei, Sib, Miri). In the state election held last, the two state seats Tasik Biru and Opar in Mas Gading were won by BN which doubtless means that the SPDP will retain this seat. Likewise, the SPDP will probably narrowly retain Baram based on the fact that the BN won all the three state seats Marudi, Teluk Usan and Mulu in that constituency in the 2016 state election. The new re-delineation has increased slightly the Malay-Melanau makeup of the

mixed seat of Saratok, which will contribute to the SPDP retaining this seat with a larger majority.

The Chinese vote swing back to BN in the 2016 state election, which most will likely be repeated in GE14, coupled with the re-delineation of the three marginal Chinese majority seats that slightly reduced the Chinese majority will probably strengthen BN's chances of winning. The BN won back the two state seats of Repok and Meradong in Sarikei from the DAP, which means it will probably also win back Sarikei. In Sibul, the BN retained the Bawang Assan and Nangka state seats with increased majorities while the DAP retained the Pelawan seat with a reduced majority in the 2016 state election; this will probably result in the DAP losing Sibul back to the BN. In Miri, the BN won back Piasau from the opposition and retained Senadin with an increased majority while the DAP retained Pujut with a reduced majority which means the BN will most likely win back Miri.

Although the DAP won Stampin by a big majority in 2013, in the recent re-delineation exercise, the hugely Chinese majority seat of Batu Litang was carved out and relocated to the Bandar Kuching parliament constituency. This move has turned Stampin into a significantly reduced Chinese-majority seat. In the 2016 state election, the DAP retained Kota Sentosa with a reduced majority while the BN not only won back Batu Kawah, it also gained the new seat of Batu Kitang. Hence the re-delineation of the constituency and the Chinese vote swing back to the BN should contribute to the BN winning back Stampin from the DAP.

In the 2016 state election, BN won back Dudong from the DAP while the latter retained Bukit Assek with a reduced majority. Overall, there was a sizable Chinese vote swung back to the BN and if the SUPP and UPP unite to nominate a single candidate, it is likely that the BN could win back Lanang. It appears that Bandar Kuching which now has an even larger Chinese majority after the re-delineation, is the only seat that the DAP will retain in GE14.

CONCLUSION

The policies and actions initiated by the late CM Adenan Satem and closely adopted by his successor Abang Johari will help secure Sarawak's status as a 'fixed deposit' for BN. Adenan's promises and activities brought huge dividends to BN in the 2016 state election where the coalition won 71 of 81 seats. The outcome of the 2016 state election will most likely be repeated in GE14 as Abang Johari has consistently followed Adenan's playbook. BN could win 30 of the 31 parliamentary seats contested in the state, with the DAP retaining only the increased Chinese-majority seat of Bandar Kuching – and with a much reduced majority at that.

<p>ISEAS Perspective is published electronically by:</p> <p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614</p> <p>Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed. Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: Lee Poh Onn and Benjamin Loh</p> <p>Assistant Editors: Vandana Prakash Nair, and Veena Nair</p>
---	--	--