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## **Winds of Change in Sarawak Politics?**

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## ABSTRACT

While the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition has dominated politics in Sarawak over the last four decades, significant changes have been taking place in the state that could weaken its control. A key development in recent years is the ascendancy of nationally based parties such as the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Parti Ke ADILan Rakyat (PKR) within the opposition forces in Sarawak. Another significant change is the swing in Chinese support from the ruling party to the opposition. These developments together with the emergence of a Dyak intelligentsia sharply critical of the ruling elite will enable opposition forces to provide a credible challenge to the BN in the forthcoming elections to the Sarawak state assembly. The paper details how opposition forces will fare in the elections. It also discusses the issue of succession to Taib, who has been Chief Minister for thirty years, and outlines key developments in the ruling state coalition since the 1960s that led to the rise of Parti Pesaka Bumiputra (PBB) as the dominant party in the BN coalition.

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# **Winds of Change in Sarawak Politics?<sup>1</sup>**

## **Introduction**

Sarawak politics appears largely unchanged with the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) in power, Abdul Taib Mahmud the Chief Minister for a record thirty years and political infighting between and within the parties waged along communal lines. However, a closer look reveals emerging trends and issues that could complicate the dynamic of state politics. It is difficult to predict whether these trends and issues could bring about any seismic change in Sarawak's political landscape. But one thing is certain – fragmentation and ferment will be features of Sarawak politics for decades to come because of the differences among the divergent political and societal forces in the resource-rich but under-developed state. The clash of these forces will underlie the political contest between the ruling BN coalition and opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) in the coming state elections later this year.

## **Dynamics of the Ruling Coalition**

Sarawak is a predominantly non-Muslim Bumiputra state (71.1 per cent in 2000) with a strong Chinese presence. However, unlike Peninsula Malaysia, no single ethnic group (out of 27) in Sarawak forms a majority; Iban (29.1%), Chinese (25.9%), Malay (22.3%), Bidayuh (8.1%), Melanau (5.5%), other indigenous (5.7%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2005, p.17-18). When Malayan Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman proposed a new federation of Malaysia, he invited Sarawak and Sabah to join Singapore and Brunei in the new entity, figuring the numerically strong Bumiputra population in these former British colonies would offset the large Chinese population of Singapore in the new political grouping (Lim 1997, p.26). As an inducement, Sarawak along with Sabah and Singapore were accorded special provisions which gave them greater autonomy compared to the eleven states of Malaya (Lim 1997, p.27). Popularly known as 'the 18 point agreement' (20 point in Sabah), the special provisions covered a wide range of issues such as religion, language, education, immigration, citizenship, tariffs and finance, the special position of indigenous races, representation in parliament, and control of forests and land. However, over time, the special rights of Sarawak (and Sabah) were seriously eroded by the powerful federal government (Lim 1997, p.53), creating a constant source of contention between federal and state leaders.

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The same ruling BN coalition has dominated Sarawak politics for the last four decades. However, there have been significant changes to this coalition's dynamics due to federal government intrusion, accommodative strategies employed by various chief ministers and internal crises faced by component parties over the years. These changes can be divided into seven phases (1) the formative years, (2) post 1970 elections, (3) co-optation of SNAP, (4) the BN3 Plus government, (5) the BN3 government, (6) Dayak consolidation, and (7) Dayak leadership crisis.

In the first phase, the ruling coalition known as the Sarawak United Front (SUF) was made up of four component parties, namely Barisan Rakyat Jati Sarawak (BARJASA), Sarawak Chinese Association (SCA), Sarawak National Party (SNAP) and Parti Pesaka Anak Sarawak (PESAKA) (Chin 1997, p.73). Although some of these parties were considered multi-ethnic, they comprised predominantly single ethnic groups: Muslim Bumiputra in BARJASA, the Chinese in SCA, while the Dayaks were in SNAP and PESAKA. Established in July 1962, the SUF originally comprised BARJASA, SCA, SNAP, PESAKA and Parti Negara (PANAS). However, PANAS withdrew from the coalition just before the 1963 elections over differences with BARJASA (Chin 1997, p.75). In 1963, the SUF won enough seats to form the first elected government led by SNAP by virtue of its electoral strength in local councils, which indirectly elected representatives for the state assembly and Parliament. Consequently, despite a vigorous attempt by federal leaders to nominate Abdul Rahman Yakub, a Muslim Bumiputra from BARJASA, for the top position (Faisal 2008, p.106), Sarawak's first chief minister, Stephen Kalong Ningkan (1963-66), came from SNAP. Barely a few years after its formation, the ruling coalition faced a major crisis which led to the ouster of Ningkan and the subsequent withdrawal of his party, SNAP, from the coalition. BARJASA leaders were able to dominate the state cabinet although it was led by a PESAKA leader, Tawi Sli (1966-1970), who succeeded Ningkan as the new chief minister. The other remaining members of the SUF at that time were SCA and PANAS which joined the coalition just before the removal of Ningkan. The domination of the Muslim Bumiputra leaders within the coalition was consolidated when the two Muslim Bumiputra parties, BARJASA and PANAS, merged to form the BUMIPUTRA party in 1966 (Leigh 1974, p.114). Throughout the Tawi Sli administration, the ruling coalition consisted of three component parties, namely PESAKA, BUMIPUTRA and SCA.

**Table 1: Ruling Coalition in Sarawak, 1962-2004**

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Component Parties</b>	<b>Established (Month/Year)</b>
Formative years (Sarawak United Front)	BARJASA, PANAS, PESAKA, SNAP, SCA	July/1962
	BARJASA, PESAKA, SNAP, SCA	March/1963
	BARJASA, PANAS, PESAKA, SCA	June/1966
	BUMIPUTRA, PESAKA, SCA	November/1966
Post 1970 elections (Perikatan) (Barisan Nasional)	BUMIPUTRA, PESAKA, SUPP, SCA	July/1970
	PBB, SUPP, SCA	January/1973
	PBB, SUPP	June/1974
Co-optation of SNAP	PBB, SUPP, SNAP	March/1976
BN3 Plus	PBB, SUPP, SNAP, PBDS	August/1983
BN3	PBB, SUPP, SNAP	March, 1987
Dayak consolidation	PBB, SUPP, SNAP, PBDS	June, 1994
Dayak crisis	PBB, SUPP, SPDP, PRS	2004

Adapted from Awang Raduan (1994, p.61), Chin (1997, p.126, 129, 132, 149), Jawan (1994, p.143), Mason (1995, p.50)

In the 1970 elections, the SUF faced a formidable challenge from the opposition comprising SNAP and SUPP. But it still managed to secure enough seats (BUMIPUTRA 12 seats, PESAKA 8 seats, SCA 3 seats) to form the government. However, PESAKA's insistence on nominating its leader, Thomas Kana, as the new chief minister and the BUMIPUTRA party's refusal to be subservient to the former because of its greater electoral strength became the stumbling block to the formation of a SUF government (Leigh 1974, p.142). Hence, the BUMIPUTRA party with the support of federal leaders forged a plan to co-opt SUPP into a new alliance, later known as Perikatan. In spite of PESAKA's unhappiness with the BUMIPUTRA party, the Dayak party decided to join Perikatan and accepted Muslim Bumiputra leadership. This move helped to consolidate the ruling Alliance (BUMIPUTRA, PESAKA, SUPP, SCA) which increased its strength in the state assembly from 23 to 35 seats (out of a total of 48 seats). The BUMIPUTRA party led the new coalition and its leader, Abdul Rahman Yakub was appointed Sarawak's third chief minister. SUPP became a senior member of the ruling coalition while the other two component parties, PESAKA and SCA, just made up the numbers. Not long after that, SCA was dissolved in compliance with SUPP's demand for its dissolution in the Perikatan agreement signed in 1970 (Leigh 1974, p.144). Another important development was the merger of BUMIPUTRA and PESAKA in 1973 to form Parti Pesaka Bumiputra Bersatu or PBB which greatly benefitted the former. Prior to the merger, both parties were competing to dominate Bumiputra voters but the merger allowed them to consolidate their strength. In the same year, the alliance was renamed the Barisan Nasional (National Front) which had co-opted several

influential opposition parties in the Peninsula such as Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan) and People's Progressive Party (PPP). In Sarawak, the BN comprised of two parties only, PBB and SUPP.

The third phase of change within the ruling coalition took place after the 1974 elections. Facing dissent within SUPP and sensing the need to find a new senior partner within the ruling coalition, chief minister Abdul Rahman Yakub decided to co-opt SNAP in order to further consolidate his position and also that of the ruling BN (Chin 1997, p.149). The expansion of Sarawak BN (PBB, SUPP, SNAP) proved to be the turning point in the ruling party's domination of Sarawak politics. From then on, opposition forces were severely weakened as seen in the BN's thumping victory in the 1979 elections which saw the party for the first time attained a two-thirds majority in the state assembly. However, schisms within Dayak politics once again changed the dynamics of Sarawak's ruling coalition when SNAP faced a leadership tussle that gave birth to another Dayak party, Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS). This was the fourth phase of the ruling coalition's development. Despite strong protests from SNAP, Taib Mahmud accepted PBDS's application to join BN, a move that severely weakened Dayak parties but further strengthened the position of PBB within the ruling coalition (Chin 1997, p.187). With the inclusion of PBDS, the new government was later known as the BN plus government.

Taib's move to accept PBDS into the BN fold soon backfired when the young party teamed up with a group of disgruntled PBB and SNAP leaders in an attempt to topple the powerful strongman-politician. The SNAP leadership, however, decided to remain within the governing coalition. PBDS, on the other hand, left Sarawak BN but remained a member of the BN alliance at national level. The party, along with the newly formed PERMAS established an opposition electoral pact known as Kumpulan Maju (Progressive Front). With the exit of PBDS, the BN was left with three parties, PBB, SUPP and SNAP, thus giving them the name BN3. This was the fifth phase of change within the ruling coalition. The much touted take-over of the state government by Kumpulan Maju fizzled out when the opposition only managed to win 20 out of 48 seats in the 1987 snap elections.

After the 1991 elections, PBDS returned to the ruling coalition when its leaders realized that the party's future could be in jeopardy as long as it remained in the opposition bench. To convince BN leaders, and especially Taib Mahmud, that it had dropped its extreme brand of racial politics, PBDS amended its constitution to allow non-Dayaks to become

members (Faisal 2008, p.218). With the return of PBDS, the Sarawak BN's membership was once again restored to four; PBB, SUPP, SNAP and PBDS. This political order did not last long when another Dayak leadership crisis brought significant changes to the composition of the ruling coalition. A schism within SNAP in 2002 paved the way for the establishment of another splinter party, Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) led by William Mawan Ikom. After its registration, SPDP subsequently applied to join Sarawak BN and its application was duly accepted by the ruling coalition. Since the new party was a SNAP breakaway party, it was allocated the same parliamentary and state seats contested by SNAP in previous elections. The membership of Sarawak BN changed again two years later when PBDS, faced a similar leadership crisis which saw another breakaway faction led by Dr James Jemut Masing forming the Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS). Taib used the same strategy to accommodate PRS by offering it PBDS's seats. This is the current line-up of Sarawak BN component parties; PBB, SUPP, SPDP and PRS.

Sarawak BN is currently dominated by PBB which has a superior representation in the state assembly and parliament. This Muslim Bumiputra dominated party achieved its prominent status within the state ruling coalition ever since Rahman Yakub took over the Chief Minister's seat in 1970. As the dominant party within the ruling coalition, PBB leaders especially the chief minister have used the party as a platform to exercise their power via the distribution of state rents, cabinet seats and senior civil service posts. PBB's main partner in the ruling coalition is SUPP. In the past, the Chinese dominated party has played the role of a king-maker in Sarawak politics. A case in point was the Ming Court Affair in 1987 where the party's support for Taib helped quell the opposition's plot to topple the chief minister. However, over the last decade, SUPP's influence in the ruling party has declined dramatically as Chinese voters have withdrawn their support for the party. A weakened SUPP faced a major crisis when the party lost eight seats in the 2006 elections, thus reducing the party's representation in the state assembly from nineteen in 2001 to eleven in 2006. If the party's popularity continues to slide in the coming state election, SUPP's representation in the state assembly could be further reduced and possibly become smaller than that of SPDP (eight assemblymen) and PRS (eight assemblymen). Naturally, the two Dayak parties would want to be the new main partner of PBB, leading to a fierce tussle that could once again change the dynamics of Sarawak's ruling coalition.



## **Nationalization of the Opposition Parties**

BN domination of politics is not absolute. For decades, opposition forces have persistently contested the ruling party's grip on power despite having minimal success. In the 1970s, two influential parties SNAP and SUPP posed the biggest threat to the young and fragile ruling coalition. Both parties, however, did not form any electoral alliance prior to the election which impeded their chance of displacing the ruling party. Along with an independent assemblyman, the two opposition parties could have formed the new government in 1970. But a quick maneuvering by the BUMIPUTRA party and federal leaders ultimately foiled that possibility. Instead, SUPP joined the Perikatan coalition, leaving SNAP as the sole opposition party in Sarawak for the next nine years. Despite being outnumbered, SNAP continued to pose a strong challenge to the ruling party as seen in the 1974 elections when the Dayak party increased its representation in the state assembly from 12 to 18 seats. In fact, the opposition party was able to chalk a credible 42.7 per cent of the popular vote, much to the dismay of the ruling coalition, especially PBB.

Sensing the electoral threat of SNAP, the ruling BN co-opted the influential Dayak party into the coalition. The inclusion of SUPP and SNAP in the ruling coalition led to the decline of Sarawak opposition forces which became greatly subdued after that. Although new opposition parties were formed, none of them have posed any serious challenge to the ruling party. In fact, almost all of the opposition parties could not survive beyond two elections due to their dismal electoral performance and the lack of financial resources. Parties like Parti Anak Jati Sarawak (PAJAR), Sarawak People's Organization (SAPO), United Malaysia Timur Party (UMAT), Parti Demokratik Bersatu (BERSATU), Parti Persatuan Rakyat Malaysia Sarawak (PERMAS) and Parti Negara Rakyat Sarawak (NEGARA) are cases in point.

Another significant development in opposition politics during the 1970s was the entry into Sarawak of a national based party, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), which was founded by several SUPP leaders who were not happy with the party leadership. The prime movers behind the formation of Sarawak DAP were Chong Siew Chiang who was then the Repok assemblyman and Ling Sie Ming (Chin 1997, p.160). Initially the two SUPP leaders planned to establish a state based party which was duly formed in June 1977 (Vanguard, 21 June 1977). Known as Sarawak United Chinese Association (SUCA), the party was supposed to be an alternative to SUPP. However, Chong later abandoned his plan to register SUCA because he felt that a national based party was more suitable to pursue his political struggle.

Other than some dissenting SUPP members, Sarawak DAP basically comprised of former SCA members who still held a grudge against SUPP for indirectly causing the demise of the party (Chin 1997, p.160). By combining forces, the two groups managed to establish Sarawak DAP which subsequently weakened SUPP. By the end of August 1978, DAP had established several branches in Sarikei, Sibuan and Kuching (Chin 1997, p.160). The DAP's foray into Sarawak politics was historic because all political parties at that time, be it BN or opposition, were state based with no presence outside of the state. Being the only national party in the state, DAP performed fairly well in its electoral debut in 1979. Despite not winning any seat, the party was able to secure 10.1 per cent of the popular vote which was significantly better than state based opposition parties. The major contribution of national based opposition parties in Sarawak was their ability to sustain the opposition struggle which the state based parties failed to achieve. For example, SAPO dissolved only a few years after its formation while the DAP has persevered despite not winning a single state seat in four consecutive elections since 1979. However, their perseverance paid off when the party managed to win three seats in the 1996 elections, one seat in 2001 and a remarkable six seats in 2006.

In the 1980s, DAP continued to challenge the ruling coalition which had become dominant in both state and parliamentary elections. Although the opposition party did not make much impact in the 1983 elections, independent candidates were able to snatch three seats from the ruling party. An astonishing 80 independent candidates contested in that election, the highest number in the history of Sarawak elections. Independent candidates have been a feature of Sarawak politics since the 1970 elections. Occasionally, they fared better than opposition party candidates by winning at least one seat in the 1970, 1979, 1983, 1996, 2001 and 2006 elections. Independents have contested for various reasons. Some of them have not believed in the ideological struggles and leadership of existing opposition parties. Hence they have stood on their own while others have been sponsored by opposing factions within BN parties who rejected the choice of their party. There have also been some independents who were planted by the ruling party in order to divide the opposition's votes.

The most significant event of the 1980s was the formation of Sarawak's first opposition coalition known as Kumpulan Maju (Progressive Group). Ignited by the clash between Taib Mahmud and his predecessor and uncle, the ruling party was thrown into a major crisis that led to the formation of a new party, PERMAS which formed an electoral pact with PBDS and DAP. The electoral pact was one of the key factors which allowed the

opposition to mount a serious challenge to the ruling party reminiscent of the feat achieved in 1970. However, the 1987 crisis, popularly known as the Ming Court Affair, was considered to be an intra-Bumiputra elite crisis which did not have much impact on the masses, especially the non-Bumiputra electorate.

After Taib took a series of accommodative and repressive measures aimed at eliminating the remaining forces left by Kumpulan Maju, the strength of the opposition was significantly weakened and it eventually disintegrated. After all the state-based opposition parties had crumbled, only the DAP was left. The party contested six seats in the 1996 elections and won three. This historic feat was all the more memorable for the opposition party as it also succeeded in defeating SUPP president and then Deputy Chief Minister Dr Wong Soon Kai in Bukit Assek.

**Table 2: The Opposition Parties in Sarawak State Elections, 1970-2006**

<b>Election</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Total State Seats</b>	<b>Seats Contested</b>	<b>Seats Won</b>	<b>% Votes Polled</b>
1970	SNAP	48	47	12	24.5
	SUPP		40	12	28.8
	Independent		66	1	7.6
1974	SNAP	48	47	18	42.7
	Independent		12	0	1.9
1979	PAJAR	48	17	0	5.1
	DAP		11	0	10.1
	SAPO		5	0	4.1
	UMAT		1	0	0.1
	Independent		53	3	19.4
1983	DAP	48	7	0	8.7
	BERSATU		4	0	0.7
	Independent		80	4	22.1
1987	PBDS	48	21	15	17.6
	PERMAS		21	5	14.2
	DAP		11	0	11.4
	BERSATU		1	0	0.02
	Independent		16	0	1.5
1991	PBDS	56	34	7	21.7
	NEGARA		28	0	1.2
	DAP		18	0	9.7
	PERMAS		12	0	3.4
	Independent		19	0	1.3
1996	DAP	62	6	3	8.9
	Independent		60	2	24.5
2001	KeADILan	62	25	0	6.9
	DAP		13	1	8.44

	STAR		5	0	2.3
	PAS		3	0	0.5
	Independent		63	1	10.7
2006	SNAP	71	29	1	9.5
	PKR		25	1	8.7
	DAP		12	6	15.1
	PAS		1	0	0.4
	Independent		20	1	3.4

Source: Mohd Faisal Syam Abdol Hazis (2008, p.234-246)

In the late 1990s, the *reformasi* (reform) movement that erupted in the Peninsula spread to Sarawak when the newly formed Parti KeADILan Nasional (KeADILan) along with its coalition partner Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) contested for the first time in Sarawak elections. The two Malay-dominated parties subsequently established a permanent presence by opening new branches throughout the state, hence transforming the make-up of Sarawak's opposition forces from regional to national-based. Sarawak KeADILan was established through the initiative of several Anwar Ibrahim supporters from the state who were involved in the *reformasi* movement in Kuala Lumpur. When the national KeADILan party was established just before the 1999 election, Anwar supporters from Sarawak went back to the state and helped to expand its wing here. The party's first state chief was Yusuf Abdul Rahman who was also the adopted son of Sarawak's third chief minister, Abdul Rahman Yakub. Yusuf's affiliation with Rahman made some people within the party uneasy because they believed that the state KeADILan chief was working for his foster father and ultimately Taib. Although Rahman and Taib were still not on talking terms at that time, some people believed that their feud was an orchestrated political *sandiwara* (ploy). Despite this skepticism, national KeADILan leaders put their trust in Yusuf to spearhead the party's challenge in the 1999 Sarawak parliamentary elections. The then membership of Sarawak KeADILan was deeply divided between former members of PBB, former PERMAS leaders, ABIM members and new young idealists. Later on, several disgruntled DAP leaders also joined KeADILan, resulting in constant tension and bickering between the leaders of both opposition parties. A few months after the 1999 election, the Sarawak KeADILan liaison committee was suspended, causing confusion among its 20,000 odd members in Sarawak (Bernama 19 January 2000). Although the reason behind the suspension was not made public, it was believed that KeAdilan's national leadership had lost confidence in the state liaison committee especially its chief, Yusuf. In August 2000, the party appointed a new liaison chief, Hafsa Harun, 60 (Bernama 17 August 2000). The former state assistant minister held the party leadership only for a short while before she was replaced. Since then, Sarawak

KeADILan has been plagued by a series of leadership changes. There have been four more leaders (Wan Zainal Wan Senusi, Dominique Ng, Mustafa Kamil Ayub and Baru Bian) within a period of 10 years. Its current state chief is Baru Bian, a prominent Lun Bawang lawyer.

PAS, on the other hand, made a quiet entry into Sarawak in the early 1990s through its social engagement programs which were mainly aimed at rural Malays. The focus of the party in Sarawak at that time was non-political with a special emphasis on *dakwah* (Islamic preaching). Encouraged by the warm reception of the locals and the strong support of its national leaders, party members in Sarawak established its state liaison office in May 1996 (PAS Sarawak 2011). The Islamic party, however, did not contest the 1996 state elections due to its belief that the people of Sarawak were not prepared to accept the party. Currently, PAS has eleven branches in Sarawak located mostly in Batang Sadong, Petra Jaya and Santubong, which are all in the Kuching and Samarahan divisions (PAS Sarawak 2011). The Islamic party is heavily backed by a group of religious teachers from the Peninsula working in the state, while locals constitute the official state leadership line-up. One prominent state chief is Haji Adam Ahid who has stood several times in Sarawak elections under the party banner. Currently, the state chief for Sarawak PAS is Ustaz Haji Osman Mustapha.

In the 1999 elections, KeADILan and PAS together with DAP formed a national alliance known as Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front) which was also established in Sarawak. The second opposition alliance in Sarawak promised to put up a credible challenge to the ruling party but this did not materialize when the ruling party won 30 out of 31 parliamentary seats in the state. In fact, the political ‘marriage’ between KeADILan, PAS and DAP lasted only a few months due to the absence of a unifying leader who could bridge their ideological differences. Despite the collapse of the opposition alliance, the three national based parties continued to participate in Sarawak elections along with a smaller state based party, State Reform Party (STAR) led by former State Assistant Minister Dr Patau Rubis.

Presently, the backbone of the opposition in Sarawak is made up of a coalition of national parties, PKR, PAS and DAP and a state party, SNAP. Known as Pakatan Rakyat (People’s Coalition), this coalition was made possible through the coming together of three major national opposition parties (PKR, PAS and DAP) that formed an alliance just after the 2008 general elections. Clearly, the opposition coalition in Sarawak has relied heavily on the durability of the national coalition to sustain it. In middle of January 2011, Sarawak PR’s

staying power was tested when SNAP surprisingly announced its decision to join the United Borneo Front (UBF) initiated in Sabah by former PKR Vice President Jeffry Kitingan. The state party's decision to join UBF raised questions about its position in PR especially when the party was embroiled in a dispute with PKR over seat allocation for the coming state elections. A few days after making public its decision to join UBF, SNAP reassured its PR partners that it would not leave the coalition simply because it had joined the former. According to its secretary-general, SNAP decided to join UBF "because we have a common ideology with our counterparts from Sabah to fight for equal rights for the people of both states (Sabah and Sarawak)" (Borneo Post 23 January 2011). Issues of regionalism thus remain a thorn within Sarawak PR along with continued differences among its local leaders. The fragmentation of opposition forces in Sarawak is largely due to contestation between national and regional sentiments within the alliance. Despite being national opposition parties, PKR, PAS and DAP have paradoxically resorted to campaigning on regional issues by promising more autonomy for the state, a 20 per cent oil royalty and RM1 billion Dayak fund. Apart from wooing the support of Sarawak voters especially the natives, the opposition coalition has pursued regional issues in order to appease anti-Peninsula sentiments within Sarawak society and the opposition coalition itself.

### **Leadership Transition**

Having the longest serving chief minister in Malaysia, it is no surprise that the most powerful man in Sarawak has emerged as a major issue in current state politics. The man at the centre of the controversy is Abdul Taib Mahmud who took over the state leadership from his uncle, Abdul Rahman Yakub, on 26 March 1981 and continues to wield an enormous amount of power (Faisal 2008, p.164). Apart from helming the state for far too long, the strongman-politician has been heavily criticized for awarding state projects to his family members and political loyalists (Aeria 2002, p.173-174), taking away state land and giving it to his family members and cronies for oil palm plantations and other development projects (Sarawak Report 2011), politicizing development which has led to stunted and inequitable growth in the state (Faisal 2009, p.103-109) and employing divisive strategies in order to strengthen his position and to quell dissent (Faisal 2008, p.209-276). These criticisms along with federal leaders' impatience to see a leadership transition taking place have put a lot of pressure on Taib to finally call it a day. Although the strongman-politician keeps on extending his tenure, sooner or later he has to pass the baton to his successor. The only question is when and to whom?

Taib has raised the issue of retirement several times before. The first time he publicly expressed his intention to step down was in 1995 (Borneo Post 16 November 1995). He even announced three candidates as his possible successor; Effendi Norwawi, Adenan Satem and Abang Johari. Of the three candidates shortlisted by Taib, Effendi Norwawi and Adenan Satem were the “hot favorites” after Abang Johari’s fallout with the Chief Minister in 1998.<sup>2</sup> Between Effendi and Adenan, the former had the upper hand because he had exhibited business acumen and the managerial skills needed to take over Sarawak.

However, Effendi’s decision to retire from politics in February 2008 despite some intense cajoling by key power brokers in the state forced Taib to turn to Adenan who has long been one of his strongest loyalists (New Straits Times 22 February 2008). Speculation of Adenan’s appointment as Sarawak’s fifth chief minister grew stronger when the Malay leader contested in the 2004 parliamentary election and was subsequently appointed Federal Minister of Natural Resources and Environment. In February 2006, Adenan was not reappointed to the federal cabinet because he wanted to ‘focus more on Sarawak politics’ (Utusan Malaysia 26 February 2006), a clear signal that he would take over the state leadership from Taib. However, the chief minister was furious with Adenan’s arrogant and presumptuous attitude prior to his ‘planned’ take-over of the state leadership, leading to a breakdown in the mentor-protégé relationship (Interview with a Sarawak political observer 9 January 2007). Adenan was immediately sidelined by Taib. Subsequently, in the 2006 state election, it was widely speculated that Adenan was to be dropped but his flagging career was kept alive when he was fielded in Tanjung Datu (instead of defending his Muara Tuang seat). Four years later, Adenan was brought back into the state cabinet, assuming the post of Special Officer in the Chief Minister’s Office (Utusan Malaysia 26 March 2010). Although Taib seemed to have reconciled with his long-time loyalist, the latter’s inclusion in the state cabinet was not seen as a move to prepare him for the chief ministership. Rather, the appointment was meant to strengthen the voice of government in the state assembly which was being drowned out by the vocal opposition assemblymen. With Adenan out of Taib’s equation, Abang Johari emerged as the only surviving candidate among the three candidates publicly announced as the strongman-politician’s possible successor. But it is widely believed that the highly regarded Abang Johari will not be picked to succeed Taib despite having the

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<sup>2</sup> Against the explicit advice of Taib, Abang Johari contested the PBB Deputy President’s post which saw a three cornered fight between the incumbent Abang Abu Bakar, Abang Johari and Adenan Satem. Taib had wanted Adenan Satem to contest against Abang Abu Bakar instead of Abang Johari. At the end, Abang Johari won which further enraged Taib.

support of federal leaders. More than anything, Taib needs a loyalist who is strong and will protect his interests well after his departure from active politics. Abang Johari is not known to be such a man.

Apart from the three senior PBB leaders, another prominent figure speculated to succeed Taib was his own son, Sulaiman who is better known for being the poster boy of Cahaya Mata Sarawak Berhad (CMSB), the multi-million ringgit financial and infrastructure conglomerate owned by Taib's family. Sulaiman's appointment as Deputy Federal Minister of Tourism after the 2008 elections fueled speculation that he would succeed his father. Had the chief minister's seat been handed over to Sulaiman, he would have continued the legacy of a family dynasty in Sarawak, reminiscent of the colonial Brookes. The appointment of Sulaiman as Sarawak's fifth chief minister would also re-ignite the Malay-Muslim Melanau tension that has marred Muslim Bumiputra politics in Sarawak since the late 1970s. However, Taib's succession plan came to an abrupt halt when Sulaiman shocked all by resigning from his federal post. He also decided not to seek re-election to the PBB deputy youth's post (Star 20 February 2010). Despite Sulaiman's withdrawal from active politics, one should not discount the possibility of him one day succeeding his father. Taib's desire to pass the baton to a loyalist might bring Sulaiman back into contention as the next chief minister along with another Taib loyalist, Awang Tengah Ali Hassan who is presently the strongman-politician's right hand man. The Bukit Sari assemblyman seems to have the trust of the chief minister as evident from the two important assistant ministerial portfolios that he holds in the state cabinet; (1) planning and resource management and (2) public utilities. Apart from Tengah, there are a host of other personalities who have also been touted to succeed Taib. Among them are Member of Parliament for Igan, Wahab Dollah; Member of Parliament for Tanjung Manis, Norah Abdul Rahman, who is Taib's niece; and former Deputy Federal Education Minister Salleh Jafaruddin who is Taib's cousin. Ultimately, Taib is expected to handpick his successor who would not only ensure the continuity of Muslim Bumiputra rule in Sarawak and sustain the dominance of PBB in the ruling coalition but most importantly, protect his family's interests.

Despite facing pressure to step down, Taib continues to helm the Sarawak government (a record thirty years, come March 2011). The federal leaders have accommodated the strongman-politician since the strategy of accommodation has been effective in maintaining the federal government's presence in Sarawak. Unless Taib refuses



to safeguard national interests, maintain Muslim Bumiputra political dominance, ensure the BN's continued dominance in the state and parliamentary elections and provide political stability (Faisal 2009a), the federal government would not change the political order that has functioned so successfully since 1970. Consequently, as a powerful strongman-politician, Taib will decide himself when to step down and who will succeed him, a decision which shall not be dictated by federal leaders including the Prime Minister.

Regardless of who succeeds Taib, the next chief minister will face a daunting task in consolidating his/her position. Immediately after assuming the most powerful political office in the state, the new chief minister could face stiff challenge from opposing factions in his/her own party, other component parties of the ruling coalition and also the opposition. These opposing forces could either attempt to bring down the newly appointed chief minister, reminiscent of the plot to topple Taib in the mid-1980s or they might want to test the power of the new strongman-politician in order to secure their own interests. Hence, the new chief minister would first have to strengthen his/her party position and then that of the ruling coalition. Subsequently, he/she has to secure the federal government's support by religiously adhering to its basic demands just as what the two previous chief ministers did (Faisal 2009a). After consolidating his/her position in the ruling coalition and securing the support of federal leaders, the new chief minister has to turn his/her attention to winning the support of the masses. This will certainly not be an easy task as the new chief minister would be dealing with a fragmented society following the long authoritarian rule of his/her predecessor.

### **Revolt of the Chinese Voters and the Rise of the Bumiputra Intelligentsia**

Today, one of the emerging trends in Sarawak politics is the gradual swing of Chinese support away from the ruling party to the opposition. During the formative years of Malaysia, Chinese voters were considered staunch supporters of the opposition, namely SUPP, which initially opposed the formation of the new nation (Chin 1997, p.63). In the 1970 elections, although the Chinese party abandoned its anti-Malaysia stance, it nonetheless remained steadfast in the opposition's struggle. The message of the party at that time was extremely simple; 'the Alliance had been in government for six years already and was a dismal failure' (Chin 1997, p.106). This simple message gained currency among Chinese voters who voted overwhelmingly for SUPP, allowing the opposition party to secure six out of seven Chinese seats in the 1970 elections at the expense of the SCA. The influence of SUPP among Chinese voters was so immense that it even successfully persuaded the community to throw their

support behind the party despite joining Sarawak Perikatan after the 1970 elections. The popularity of SUPP among Chinese voters was evident in the subsequent 1974 elections when the party managed to defend all the seats that it won in previous elections with almost the same percentage of the popular vote.

Since 1974, Chinese voters have persistently supported the ruling party, hence allowing SUPP to dominate the Chinese seats in every parliamentary and state election. However, the domination of SUPP over Chinese voters ended abruptly in 1996 when its President Dr Wong Soon Kai failed to defend his Bukit Assek seat, losing to Wong Ho Leng from DAP with a wafer-thin 226 majority (Election Commission of Malaysia 1999, p.105). Three other top SUPP leaders also lost in the elections - Thomas Hii King Hiong (Meradong), Goh Chung Siong (Pelawan) and Michael Sim Kiam Hui (Kidurong). It was a historic result because DAP had never won more than one seat prior to that election.

**Table 3: State Election Results in the Chinese Majority Seats, 1970-2006**

<b>Election</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Total Chinese Seats</b>	<b>Seats Contested</b>	<b>Seats Won</b>	<b>% Votes Polled</b>
1970	SCA-Alliance	7	7	1	27.8
	SUPP		7	6	56.8
	SNAP		7	0	12.5
	Independent		n.a.	0	2.9
1974	SUPP-BN	7	7	6	55.6
	SNAP		7	1	44.1
	Independent		1	0	0.3
1979	SUPP-BN	8	8	7	52.5
	DAP		6	0	26.1
	SAPO		1	0	7.7
	Independent		n.a.	1	13.8
1983	SUPP-BN	8	8	8	67.0
	DAP		5	0	25.1
	SNAP		1	0	1.0
	Independent		7	0	6.9
1987	SUPP-BN	8	8	8	64.1
	DAP		8	0	33.6
	PERMAS		2	0	2.2
	Independent		1	0	0.1
1991	SUPP-BN	11	11	11	67.0
	DAP		10	0	28.8
	PBDS		2	0	3.7
	NEGARA		3	0	0.5
	Independent		1	0	0.1
1996	SUPP-BN	14	14	10	62.5
	DAP		6	3	23.3

	Independent		10	1	14.2
2001	SUPP-BN	13	13	12	66.5
	DAP		10	1	24.5
	KeADILan		4	0	7.8
	Independent		3	0	1.1
2006	SUPP-BN	15	15	8	49.2
	DAP		11	6	42.0
	PKR		4	1	8.2
	Independent		2	0	0.7

Notes: n.a. (not available)

Adapted from Searle (1983, p.219-225), Leigh (1974, p.136-137) and Election Commission of Malaysia (1975, p.63-67), (1980, p.86-89), (1983, p.85-87), (1988a, p.82-83), (1992, p.152-155), (1997, p.173-174), (2002, p.124-126), (2006, p.190-194)

The shock defeat of its candidates especially its President served as a wake-up call for SUPP which needed young blood to re-energize the party. State assemblyman for Piasau Dr George Chan subsequently took over the party leadership from Dr Wong Soon Kai in 1997 on a promise to win back Chinese support. This leadership change proved to be effective in winning back the Chinese votes when the party recovered lost ground via a near clean sweep of Chinese seats in the subsequent 2001 elections. But, just when SUPP thought that Chinese support had returned and would remain with the party, Chinese voters especially in the Kuching division rocked it with an even bigger shock in 2006 when a record seven SUPP candidates lost to DAP and PKR (SUPP also lost the Iban seat of Engkilili to SNAP). A host of national and local issues triggered the swing, namely a rise in petrol prices and other consumer goods, high land lease renewal rates, unhappiness over Taib's leadership, allegations of corruption against state leaders and internal bickering within SUPP. This was the biggest defeat suffered by the Chinese party in the history of Sarawak elections. The revolt of the Chinese voters also spread to the central part of the state when an overwhelming number of them voted for the opposition in the Sibu by-election held in May 2010. In the said by-election, DAP managed to grab the parliamentary seat from SUPP by a slim 398 vote majority (Star 18 May 2010). In the previous 2008 elections, SUPP won comfortably in Sibu with a whopping 3,235 majority.

The revolt of Chinese voters is expected to persist in the looming state elections expected to be held by July 2011. In a survey carried out by Merdeka Center on 518 respondents across Sarawak in the middle of 2010, clues to the reasons behind the revolt emerged (Faisal and Ibrahim 2010, p.4-7). Based on the survey, majority of the Chinese voters were pessimistic about the prospects for national economy and felt dejected over

perceived marginalization of the community. Since the state of the economy is an important variable dictating voting behavior of the Chinese electorate, their perception that national economy was not going in the right direction explained why they voted for the opposition. They also felt that the Muslim Melanau-led government had implemented policies which favored Muslim Bumiputras at the expense of their community. On top of that, the Chinese voters were also unhappy with weak leadership within the ruling coalition, intra-party rivalries, money politics and corruption. They also urged BN to drop its brand of racial politics, spend money prudently and to implement economic policies which would really benefit the general public. Another source of Chinese discontent which the Merdeka Centre survey did not address (the survey was actually a national survey aimed at identifying general issues and concerns of Malaysian voters in general) was Taib's leadership. Apart from holding the office of Chief Minister for far too long, Taib who is popularly known as 'Pek Mo' (white hair) among Sarawak Chinese was accused of implementing development policies that largely benefitted his family members and political cronies at the expense of the general Chinese business community. Another point of contention was SUPP's failure to stand up to the Chief Minister, resulting in the party's deteriorating influence within the ruling coalition (Welsh 2006, p.23).

Apart from Taib, another local issue that triggered the Chinese revolt of 2006 was the high land lease renewal rate imposed by the government. Usually perceived as an issue for rural natives, land suddenly became an important issue among urban Chinese whose land leases were expiring. In 2006, the rate for land lease renewal was fixed at between 25%-50% (of market value) for residential homes and recreational grounds, while the rate for commercial and industrial land was fixed at between 25%-61% (Star 26 May 2007). When the land premium rates were made public in 2006, the opposition instantly exploited the issue. After losing seven Chinese seats in the 2006 elections, Taib's government revised the land premium but the opposition argued that the new rates were still very high and burdensome to the people; 25% of the market price for residential and recreational land, 25% to 40% for commercial and industrial land, and 25% for agricultural land. Despite this review, majority of the Chinese voters were still unhappy and concurred with the opposition's argument. After intense pressure from SUPP and the Chinese electorate, the state government reviewed the land premium for the third time in May 2010. The new rate for the land lease has now been fixed at RM1,000 (for a terrace house), RM3,000 (semi-detached) and RM6,000 (detached house) under the 60-year-lease category; and RM1,300, RM3,900 and RM7,800 respectively

for the 999-year-lease category (Borneo Post 29 January 2011, p.5). According to the state government, these rates are much lower than the rates offered by Selangor and Penang, two opposition-controlled states. However, the opposition cleverly turned this issue around and demanded for automatic renewal of land leases. They also boasted that the new favorable land premium was made possible by their strong presence in the state and their constant pressure for a major review. By this stage, SUPP's image had been irreversibly tainted. As a result, the Chinese party even contemplated quitting the Sarawak BN coalition (New Straits Times 5 September 2010) because a lot of Chinese grouches highlighted by the party to the state leadership had not been addressed. The severe erosion of SUPP's popularity due to its failure to address Chinese grouches has forced the party to consider all possible options to save itself. However, the party made a humiliating U-turn after meeting the prime minister who promised to resolve their woes.

In comparison to the Bumiputras, the Chinese voters seem to be more susceptible to change because they reside in urban areas which all have basic amenities and access to alternative source of information (especially Chinese newspapers and the Internet). Hence, the BN's use of development projects as a tool to draw support from the electorate has not been as effective in urban areas while the party's control over information (especially on corrupt practices) has been less than complete. Based on the results of the Sibuluan by-election and the Merdeka Centre survey, SUPP is set to lose more seats; not only the Chinese seats but also the Bidayuh seats that have been allocated to the party in the forthcoming state elections.

Apart from the revolt of the Chinese voters, there is a growing number of Dayak intelligentsia who are bold enough to challenge the traditional Dayak families and Muslim Bumiputra elites. Although they are small in number, their presence is strongly felt in cyberspace where more than a dozen blogs run by the Dayak intelligentsia. Among them are Broken Shield, Ai Pengayu, Borneo Warrior, Bukit Tunggal, Dayak Baru, Dayak Nation, Gerempung Ruai, Jentau Injin Langit, Kopi Sejuk, Nadai Nama Nama, Pengayau, Penjurai Apai Enduq, Sarawak Headhunter, Seban Menoa, TBS Bidayuh, Teropong Dunya Aki Andan, The Dyaks Blog, The Truth Revealed, Tiyung Dayak, Uchu Keling and Rengah Sarawak. Most of these blogs expose the corrupt practices of Sarawak BN leaders especially the chief minister and the plight of Dayaks in regard to their land rights. Most of these blogs also extensively quote information provided by a popular blog, Sarawak Report, which reveals well researched data on the abuse of power and corrupt acts committed by Taib, his

family members and cronies. Politically, the Dayak intelligentsia align themselves to PKR and also the newly revived Dayak party. SNAP. Some of the Dayak intelligentsia had contested in previous state elections while others are considered green-horn. As compared to the Chinese, it is difficult to assess the sentiments of the Dayak voters. Even if there is wide discontent towards the ruling party, this sentiment has often been easily neutralized by the deployment of instant projects and cash rewards. Rural backwardness and economically deprived Dayak communities contribute to the continued relevance of this feudal strategy in cajoling the community to support the ruling coalition. The Dayak intelligentsia has attempted to challenge the status quo through the power of the internet but since majority of the population do not have access to this technology and a significant number of them are still illiterate, the winds of change instigated by this group of people would likely not be blowing that soon.

### **The Forthcoming State Elections**

There is great anticipation about the forthcoming state elections, for several reasons. First, this is the first state election to be held after the 2008 general elections which brought about significant change to the peninsula. Immediately after the elections, the opposition coalition declared its desire to capture Putrajaya (the administrative capital of Malaysia) via Petrajaya (the administrative capital of Sarawak). This has set the stage for a fierce battle between the opposition and the ruling party in the looming state election. It also presents the opposition a good platform to gauge its popularity here and subsequently assess its chances of forming the new federal government. Second, the state election allows the people of Sarawak a glance into the future since the chief minister is expected to prepare a leadership line-up that will form the future nucleus of state government.

**Table 4: Vote-Majority in the 2006 Sarawak State Elections**

<b>Seats</b>	<b>&lt;1000</b>	<b>1001-2000</b>	<b>2001-3000</b>	<b>3001-4000</b>	<b>4001-5000</b>	<b>&gt;5001</b>	<b>Total</b>
Malay/Melanau	3	2	4	6	3	7	25
Iban	3	6	5	3	3	0	20
Chinese	4	3	1	3	4	0	15
Bidayuh	0	1	1	3	1	0	6
Orang Ulu	2	0	1	0	0	0	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>69</b>

Notes: Two Malay/Melanau seats were won uncontested by the BN. Hence, the total of state seats in Sarawak is 71.

Extracted from Election Commission Malaysia (2008, p.89-101)

Sarawak has a total of 71 state seats which can be divided into Malay/Melanau majority seats (27), Iban (21), Chinese (15), Bidayuh (6) and Orang Ulu (3). In the 2006 elections, the opposition won nine seats of which three had a winning majority of less than 1,000 votes (Kota Sentosa, Engkilili, Ngemah), two seats between 1,001-2,000 votes (Padungan, Kidurong), two seats between 3,001-4,000 votes (Batu Lintang, Meradong) and the remaining two seats between 4,001-5,000 votes (Pending, Bukit Assek). Most of these seats are Chinese seats while two of them are Iban seats (Engkilili, Ngemah). The revolt of the Chinese voters could persist and spread to the northern part of Sarawak as indicated by the Sibü by-election. Although it was initially considered impossible for DAP to wrest control of Sibü from SUPP because of the big number of Iban and Malay voters (33 per cent) in the constituency, the opposition party managed a surprise. According to PJ Utara Member of Parliament Tony Pua, his party (DAP) was able to secure victory due to its ability to increase Chinese support from 62% to 69%, a seven per cent vote gain. Assuming the seven per cent vote swing sweeps across all Chinese seats in Sarawak, the opposition party could possibly secure four more seats (Repok, Dudong, Pelawan and Pujut). By securing eleven out of fifteen Chinese seats, the opposition (especially DAP) would severely undermine the dominance of the ruling party and seriously question the future of SUPP. In fact, it will be no surprise if the opposition secures other Chinese seats with hitherto big winning margins in 2006; namely Batu Kawa (4,180), Piasau (3,918) and Senadin (4,799).

In the Iban constituencies, the opposition has a fighting chance in at least five seats (Engkilili, Ngemah, Batang Ai, Kemena, Pelagus). Two of them are currently held by Independents (Johnical Rayong Ngipa for Engkilili and Gabriel Adit Demong for Ngemah) but one of them (Johnical initially contested under SNAP but later quit from the party to be a BN friendly assemblyman) joined SUPP while the other (Gabriel) formed a new opposition party, Parti Cinta Malaysia (PCM). These two Iban seats could easily swing back to BN since the party is expected to lure the voters in these constituencies with various development projects and other “goodies”. However, the swelling dissatisfaction among Iban voters over their continued marginalization and over land related issues could keep the two Iban seats in the opposition fold with possibly an additional three seats; Batang Ai, Kemena and Pelagus. In 2006, BN encountered a stiff challenge in Batang Ai when its incumbent, Dublin Unting Ingkot faced a popular opposition leader, Nicholas Bawin Anggat from SNAP. Even with the might of the BN machinery behind him, the incumbent only managed to scrape through with a wafer-thin 806 majority. Although the ruling party increased its majority to 1,854 votes in

the 2009 Batang Ai by-election, this increase was largely due to sympathy votes that the BN candidate received (due to the death of Dublin) and the many promises of development projects made during the by-election. Batang Ai could thus pose a problem to the ruling party if BN fails to deliver a total of RM75 million worth of projects that it pledged to the electorate in 2009 (Star 19 June 2009). Additionally, the prospect of Nicholas Bawin contesting again in Batang Ai in the next state election also spells trouble for the ruling party.

Another problem seat for BN is Kemena. In the last 2006 elections, the ruling party won this seat with a relatively small majority of 1,572 votes. It is likely that the opposition will put up a strong fight in this constituency since there is a growing discontent towards the government over land issues. There are at least 10 land cases alleging that the state government has taken away people's land by 'handing them over to crony companies' interested in planting oil palm and acacia (Tawie 5 January 2011). Infighting within PRS over its potential candidate in Pelagus, on the other hand, could pry another Iban seat away from the ruling party. The controversial seat is presently held by Larry Sng who first contested the seat in 2001 when he replaced his father, Sng Chee Hua, under the now deregistered PBDS. He stood on a PRS ticket in May 2006 but was expelled from the party in 2007 following an internal leadership crisis, which saw the party split into two factions with him leading the rival faction (Borneo Post 28 January 2011, p.1). Despite being partyless, Larry has been retained as State Assistant Minister in the Chief Minister Department, much to the irritation of PRS President, Dr James Masing. Replacing an incumbent with a new candidate is normal practice among political parties during election time; hence it would not normally lead to any party's downfall. However, Larry Sng is no ordinary incumbent. He is from an influential family who has the resources and manpower to mobilize enough support to take on his challenger in Pelagus. The animosity between PRS and SPDP could also cost the ruling party a few Dayak seats including Pelagus. According to the PRS president, the party could win all nine seats allocated to them provided the other BN component parties did not sabotage the party (Tawie 25 January 2011). Infighting between the two main Dayak parties within BN would likely intensify when SUPP loses more seats in the coming election, thus further reducing the importance of the Chinese party within the coalition. This will present SPDP and PRS with an opportunity to take over the role of SUPP as the main partner of PBB.

In the Bidayuh constituencies, the opposition could deny BN a clean sweep by taking possibly two seats, Kedup and Bengoh, which have a relatively small vote majority; 1,981



and 3,988 respectively. Kedup could present a surprise loss to BN just like in 2006 by significantly reducing the ruling party's winning majority from 7,016 votes in 2001 to 1,981 votes in 2006. The growing unhappiness of Kedup voters towards its five-term assemblyman, Frederick Bayoi Manggie, would likely contribute to the downfall of BN in this Bidayuh constituency. In Bengoh, the unhappiness of the electorate towards the incumbent, Dr Jerip Susil, would likely sway a significant number of Bidayuh voters there away from the ruling party. His critics argue that the two-term assemblyman has not been able to bring substantial development and seldom visits his constituency (Fernandez 22 September 2010). On top of that, peoples' anger over the controversial Bengoh dam would likely see the ruling party fail to retain the Bidayuh seat. The completed dam should already have impounded water but the refusal of 1,500 people from four villagers to relocate and the possible backlash from the impoundment has forced the government to postpone the relocation exercise indefinitely (Tawie 12 December 2010). This is another dam that could condemn the ruling party in the forthcoming state election. Still, it is difficult to gauge the sentiment of Bidayuh voters who have consistently supported the ruling party especially after the neutralization of a popular Bidayuh opposition leader, Dr Patau Rubis. Although his dormant STAR party is not a member of the ruling coalition, he had been seen campaigning for BN in the previous state elections. The opposition's attempts to capture Bidayuh seats could be difficult but the fact that the community has had a tendency to throw its support behind respected opposition candidates proves that these seats are far from safe.

**Table 5: Hot Seats in the Forthcoming State Elections**

	Seats	Candidates/Parties Contested in 2006	Vote Polled in 2006 (%)	Majority
Chinese seats				
1	Padungan	<b>Dominique Ng Kim Ho (PKR)</b> Lily Yong Lee Lee (BN/SUPP)	<b>8,002 (54.9)</b> 6,585 (45.1)	1,417
2	Pending	<b>Violet Yong Wui Wui (DAP)</b> Sim Kheng Hui (BN/SUPP)	<b>11,632 (61.6)</b> 7,260 (38.4)	4,372
3	Batu Lintang	<b>Voon Lee Shan (DAP)</b> Chan Seng Khai (BN/SUPP)	<b>8,806 (62)</b> 5,399 (38)	3,407
4	Kota Sentosa	Yap Chin Loi (BN/SUPP) <b>Chong Chieng Jen (DAP)</b>	6,048 (47.9) <b>6,579 (52.1)</b>	531
5	Batu Kawah	Wong Huan Yu (PKR) <b>Tan Joo Phoi (BN/SUPP)</b>	2,575 (27.6) <b>6,755 (72.4)</b>	4,180
6	Repok	<b>David Teng Lung Chi (BN/SUPP)</b> Kung Chin Chin (DAP)	<b>5,502 (52.8)</b> 4,926 (47.2)	576
7	Meradong	Wong Kung Kuong (Ind) <b>Ting Tze Fui (DAP)</b> Wong Zee Yeng (BN/SUPP)	603 (6.2) <b>5,990 (61.8)</b> 2,414 (24.9)	3,578

		Junak ak Jawek (Ind)	117 (1.2)	
8	Bukit Assek	<b>Wong Hong Leng (DAP)</b> Ngieng Kiong Ann (BN/SUPP)	<b>10,380 (64.8)</b> 5,629 (35.2)	4,751
9	Dudong	<b>Soon Choon Teck (BN/SUPP)</b> Stephen Lu Cheng Kuok (DAP)	<b>7,359 (51.4)</b> 6,951 (48.6)	408
10	Bawang Assan	<b>Wong Soon Koh (BN/SUPP)</b> Wong Kee Woan (DAP)	<b>6,804 (61.3)</b> 4,300 (38.7)	2,504
11	Pelawan	<b>Goh Chung Siong (BN/SUPP)</b> Ting Chek Ming (DAP)	<b>7,375 (50.9)</b> 7,112 (49.1)	263
12	Kidurong	Paul Yong Khing Kee (BN/SUPP) <b>Chiew Chiu Sing (DAP)</b>	6,853 (44.6) <b>8,517 (55.4)</b>	1,664
13	Piasau	Ngu Hee Hieng (PKR) <b>George Chan Hong Nam (BN/SUPP)</b>	2,655 (28.8) <b>6,573 (71.2)</b>	3,918
14	Pujut	Fong Pau Teck (DAP) <b>Chia Chu Fatt (BN/SUPP)</b>	5,123 (44.1) <b>6,493 (55.9)</b>	1,370
15	Senadin	Chai Chook Fui (PKR) <b>Lee Kim Sin (BN/SUPP)</b>	2,374 (24.9) <b>7,173 (75.1)</b>	4,799
Iban seats				
16	Engkilili	<b>Johnical Rayong Ngipa (SNAP)</b> Jonathan Krai Pilo (BN/SUPP)	<b>3,442 (53.3)</b> 3,016 (46.7)	426
17	Batang Ai	<b>Dublin Unting Ingkot (BN/PRS)</b> Nicholas Bawin Anggat (SNAP)	<b>3,295 (56.9)</b> 2,489 (43.1)	806
18	Ngemah	<b>Gabriel Adit Demong (Ind)</b> Alexander Vincent (BN/PRS) Richard Lias (SNAP)	<b>2,582 (52.1)</b> 2,033 (41) 341 (6.9)	549
19	Pelagus	<b>Larry Sng (BN/PRS)</b> Simon Sibat (SNAP) Jeffery Nuing Ebom (Ind)	<b>5,965 (64.6)</b> 541 (5.9) 2,726 (29.5)	3,239
20	Kemena	John Brian Anthony (SNAP) <b>Stephen Rundi Utom (BN/PBB)</b>	3,178 (40.1) <b>4,750 (59.9)</b>	1,572
Bidayuh seats				
21	Kedup	<b>Frederick Bayoi Manggie (BN/PBB)</b> Razali Bolhi (SNAP)	<b>5,635 (60.7)</b> 3,654 (39.3)	1,981
22	Bengoh	Mangan Ngandok (SNAP) <b>Jerip Susil (BN/SUPP)</b>	3,552 (32.1) <b>7,540 (67.9)</b>	3,988
Orang Ulu seats				
23	Belaga	Stanley Ajang Batok (Ind) <b>Liwan Lagang (BN/PRS)</b> John Bampa (SNAP)	1,628 (37) <b>1,855 (42.2)</b> 912 (20.8)	227
24	Ba'kelalan	Baru Bian (SNAP) <b>Balang Rining (BN/SPDP)</b>	1,589 (43.5) <b>2,064 (56.5)</b>	475
Malay/Melanau seats				
25	Sadong Jaya	Piee Ling (PKR) <b>Wan Wahap Wan Senusi (BN/PBB)</b>	1,857 (40.6) <b>2,715 (59.4)</b>	858
26	Beting Maro	Alem Din (PAS) <b>Bolhassan Di (BN/PBB)</b>	1,901 (40.5) <b>2,796 (59.5)</b>	895
27	Saribas	<b>Wahbi Junaidi (BN/PBB)</b> Abang Zulkifli Abang Engkeh (PKR)	<b>2,441 (50.9)</b> 2,347 (49.1)	94

Extracted from Election Commission Malaysia (2008, p.89-101)

Two out of three Orang Ulu seats are considered black seats, with both the Prime Minister and his Deputy have been making regular and frequent pre-elections visits and

pledging numerous development projects in order to woo the Orang Ulu electorate. The two Orang Ulu seats are Belaga (227 vote-majority) and Ba'kelalan (475 vote-majority). Belaga is where the highly controversial Bakun dam is located. Started in the early 1980s, the hydroelectric project has affected about 15,000 people from 15 communities who have had to be relocated in order to give way to the project (Malaysian Democracy 1998). Although the ruling party has successfully confronted previous backlashes from voters of the area by continuously winning the seat since 1983, the recent water impoundment at the dam could reignite the electorate's discontent. Begun in October 2010, the impoundment which is expected to last for eight months has significantly reduced the water level of the Rejang River and its tributaries, creating havoc to riverine communications and creating problems for the people (New Straits Times 25 October 2010). Sensing the fragility of Belaga, the Prime Minister made a pre-election visit there in January 2011 and handed out RM100 million worth of development projects (Sarawak Tribune 18 January 2011). On top of that, Najib announced that the government will write off the remaining RM41 million housing loan involving 1,500 families at the Sungai Asap Resettlement Scheme (Free Malaysia Today 17 January 2011).

Ba'kelalan is another hot Orang Ulu seat that could possibly fall to the opposition in the coming state election owing to voter dissatisfaction towards the incumbent, Nelson Balang Rining, who has been severely criticized for not fulfilling his development promises. Apart from that, the popularity of the opposition candidate, Baru Bian, among Ba'kelalan voters is another factor that shall likely sway the seat in favor of the opposition. In the last 2006 elections, Baru was able to put up a commendable challenge, losing to Nelson by only 475 votes. The Sarawak PKR chief's popularity could once again pose a serious threat to BN in the coming state elections. The concern of BN leaders is quite evident in the parade of federal leaders including the Prime Minister and his Deputy who pledged various new development projects in this constituency as inducements to win over the electorate.

In the Malay/Melanau constituencies, BN is expected to regain the ground lost in 2006, where the ruling party was almost defeated in three seats (Sadong Jaya – 858 vote majority, Beting Maro – 895, Saribas – 94). The Chief Minister is expected to replace the incumbents in these seats (Wan Wahab Wan Senusi in Sadong Jaya, Bolhassan Di in Beting Maro and Wahbi Junaidi in Saribas) since they were the major source of discontent among the voters. They were accused of failing to bring development projects and of taking away

peoples' lands to give to private companies for oil palm plantations. By replacing the BN incumbents in these hot seats, the ruling party could easily win back the support of Muslim Bumiputra voters. It is expected that BN will splash instant projects in these constituencies in order to win over voters support. However, it is likely that the opposition will continue to exploit existing anger and disappointment amongst rural Malay voters if it is able to find respectable candidates, carry out a persuasive campaign and mobilize its supporters during polling day.

If there is no mass movement aimed at inciting discontent amongst the Dayaks over their perceived marginalization, the opposition could possibly win a maximum of 20 seats (11 Chinese, 5 Iban, 2 Orang Ulu, 1 Bidayuh, 1 Malay/Melanau) which are four seats short of denying BN a two-thirds majority in the state assembly. Again, this prediction depends on various other factors such as candidate selection, the strength of the opposition's campaign machinery, voter turnout, issues that arise during the campaign period, the ability of the opposition (including independents) to ensure one-to-one fights, the solidarity of component parties within BN, vote-buying, political intimidation and other forms of electoral irregularities. Electoral dynamics shall ultimately determine the actual outcome of the elections.

But what if the improbable happens in the coming state election? Should the opposition manage to secure enough seats to form the new government, who will be PR's choice for the chief minister's post? Would the opposition coalition seek to secede Sarawak from Malaysia? To unseat the BN government, the opposition has to secure at least 36 seats to form a simple majority in the state assembly. Most of the seats would come from Iban, Chinese and Malay/Melanau constituencies while a handful would come from Bidayuh and Orang Ulu areas. Among the PR component parties, PKR and SNAP (if they remained part of the PR coalition) could be the biggest gainers since both parties are expected to field the most number of candidates in the forthcoming state elections. Hence, they would benefit tremendously if a significant number of Sarawak voters changed their electoral allegiance. In 2006, PKR contested in 25 seats (mostly in Malay/Melanau seats) while SNAP contested in 29 seats (mostly in Iban and Bidayuh seats) but the national opposition party is expected to contest most of the seats that the Dayak party contested in the next state elections, hence outnumbering the latter. The DAP, on the other hand, is expected to contest 11 or 12 Chinese seats (in 2006, DAP contested 12 seats) while PAS will contest 1 or 2 Malay/Melanau seats

(in 2006, PAS contested one seat), making both parties powerless to vie for the chief ministership by virtue of their weak electoral strength. If PKR secures the largest number of seats amongst the PR coalition, its state chief Baru Bian could well emerge as the fifth chief minister. But if SNAP outnumbers the former in the state assembly, then the latter's number one leader Edwin Dundang Bugak (if he stood for election and won his seat) would likely succeed Taib. If this happens then the four decades' reign of Muslim Bumiputra domination in Sarawak politics would end. Unlike in Perak or other Malay states in the Peninsula, the elevation of a non-Muslim Malay leader to the highest political office in Sarawak does not contradict the state constitution which has no special provision about the ethnic or religious affiliation of the chief minister.

A PR government in Sarawak would greatly change the current relationship between the state and federal government. A PR state government would definitely rebuild state autonomy by reviving the "18-point agreement" accorded to Sarawak on the formation of Malaysia. The federal government, on the other hand, would surely challenge this regional agenda by increasing its intrusion into the affairs of the state. Indeed, one of the first things that the BN led federal government would likely do is to establish UMNO in Sarawak and also enhance the powers of the Federal Secretary's Office. This office would then emerge as the platform to launch the federal government's assault to retake the state. This would definitely amplify political ferment in Sarawak, hitherto dormant for the last few decades. Still, despite this ferment, Sarawak PR would likely not seek to secede the state from the federation. After all, as an extension of the national opposition coalition, Sarawak PR is very much committed to preserving the federation. Furthermore, PR would not be foolish enough to commit political suicide by initiating Sarawak's secession from Malaysia and ultimately being blamed for it. Furthermore, the general population in Sarawak would likely not take the same path that Singapore took in 1965 despite its dissatisfaction over federal government intrusion in their lives, since they have long come to terms with and benefitted from the federation.

## **Conclusion**

Change is already taking place in Sarawak politics albeit not to the extent of changing the government led by powerful strongman-politician Taib. Fragmentation of the ruling coalition, the changing face of opposition parties, the imminent retirement of Taib, the revolt of Chinese voters and the emergence of a Dayak intelligentsia are manifestations of change

that have been generated by the state's attempt to dominate Sarawak's electorate and the contests mounted against this domination by various forces in society. Certainly, the political fragmentation and the ferment that exists in Sarawak could challenge the strongman-politician institution that has dominated the state since 1970. When the masses are divided, it would be difficult for strongmen-politicians to employ old tactics such as patronage and intimidation to secure their support. The BN definitely has to change its approach in order to remain relevant. The opposition, on the other hand, could exploit the existing fragmentation and political ferment by convincing voters that they offer a better alternative. Paradoxically, their populist approaches such as the promise to accord 20 per cent oil royalty to Sarawak, the setting up of RM1 billion Dayak fund, the promise of greater autonomy to the Bornean state would only help to further deepen the old politics that the opposition alliance at the national level has set to quash. The biggest challenge for the opposition then is to be true to its principles and to fight a long battle to reform Sarawak politics for the genuine benefit of the people.

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