

2006 Sarawak State Elections:

Issues and Electoral Results

ELECTIONS DE 2006 DANS L'ETAT DU SARAWAK: LES ENJEUX ET LES RÉSULTATS ÉLECTORAUX

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Abstract: Malaysia held the ninth Sarawak state election on May 20, 2006. It has invited various issues such as native customary rights land development, fuel hike and Chief Minister successor issue. Barisan Nasional won 62 of the 71 seats. The result was seen as a shock because BN failed to maintain the big mandate given from the previous election which was 60 of the 62 seats contested. The opposition meanwhile won 9 seats, reflecting new voting attitudes among the voters. This article examines the election issues and their performance in the election. This article also discusses the factors that influenced the voting patterns and the implications in the future. It is drawn from a 14 days fieldwork since nomination day, throughout election campaign period and polling day in May 2006.

Key words: Malaysia; State Elections; Voting Patterns; Election Issues; Electoral Results

Résumé: La Malaisie a tenu la neuvième élection dans l'État de Sarawak le 20 mai 2006. Cela a causé des problèmes divers, tels que les droits coutumiers de l'aménagement des terres, l'augmentation des prix de carburant et les successeurs du ministre en chef. Barisan Nasional a remporté 62 des 71 sièges. Le résultat a été considéré comme un choc, car BN n'a pas réussi à maintenir le grand mandat de l'élection précédente, c'est-à-dire obtenir 60 des 62 sièges à pourvoir. Pendant ce temps, l'opposition a remporté 9 sièges, ce qui reflète les nouvelles attitudes de vote chez les électeurs. Cet article examine les problèmes électoraux et leur performance dans l'élection. Il explique également les facteurs qui ont influencé les habitudes de vote et les implications dans l'avenir. Il est tiré d'un travail de 14 jours sur le terrain depuis le jour de nomination, durant toute la période de campagne électorale et le jour du scrutin en mai 2006.

Mots-clés: Malaisie; élections de l'État; habitudes de vote; problèmes électoraux; résultats électoraux

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's political system framework is based on federal constitutional monarchy with the king as head of state and the Prime Minister is the head of government. Federal government has its legislative power vested in the Parliament and the 13 states under the state assemblies.

Malaysia held the ninth Sarawak State Legislative Assembly (SLA) elections on May 20, 2006 after the date of nomination was confirmed for May 9, 2006. The Elections Committee (EC) also confirmed a duration of eleven days for the campaign taking into account the interest of 892,537 voters including 14,727 voters via postal service as well as the geographical factor and the increase in the number of seats from 62 to 71 in this state elections (New Straits Times, 25 April 2006). SLA was dissolved by the Governor (Yang di-Pertua Negeri) Sarawak, Tun Abang Muhammad Salahuddin Abang Barieng with the advice of the Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud on April 24, 2006 to enable the selection process via casting of votes, one of the branches of democracy taking place in Sarawak. While the 1996 elections saw Barisan Nasional (BN) winning 57 out of the 62 seats which were being competed for, the 2001 elections witnessed BN controlling 61 out of the 62 seats with the remaining seat being held by the opposition party, Democratic Action Party (DAP) in the SLA constituency of Kidurong. Hence, this article will attempt to study the issues and achievements from this election and also study the performance of parties involved especially that of BN.

2006 ELECTION ISSUES AND CAMPAIGN

BN Sarawak was a combination of four component parties, them being Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) headed by Taib Mahmud; Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) under the leadership of Tan Sri Dr George Chan; Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) led by Datuk Seri Dr James Jemut Masing, and Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS) chaired by Datuk William Mawan. All these parties under the BN banner compromised and agreed to stand for elections and each were allocated 35 seats (PBB), 19 seats (SUPP), 9 seats (PRS) and 8 seats (SPDP).

A large number of events took place before the elections began. Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, the then Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) had challenged BN Sarawak to prove their capability of achieving a 100 percent victory in the upcoming elections. Several events then commenced including a visit by the then Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to Taib Mahmud's house and the assembly of the Government Supporters' Club in Kuching. In actual fact, Taib was an extraordinary leader for the people of Sarawak. He was seen as an individual filled with vigour and high aspirations, highly experienced and capable of great achievements. Even though he had been leading them since March 1981, he still persevered and continued to be motivated in order to lead, what more with already succeeding in bringing reformation to Sarawak's surroundings from the aspects of politics, social, economy and infrastructure regardless of his constantly being questioned especially criticized on the imbalance of the development based on ethnicity and district. Besides that, there were those of the opinion that he had already been too long in his leadership. Although the crowd was not as great as in 1987, it still left an effect on Taib. In 1987, 23 years younger from his age of 73 years today, a crisis labeled the uncle-nephew relationship crisis that is between Tun Rahman, the Yang DiPertua of Sarawak and Taib, occurred. Tun Rahman was seen criticizing Taib openly especially emphasizing on the relationship with the Federal government so much so that Taib had once left a function attended by both of them due to the open political war upon him by his uncle.

The difference of leadership style can be assumed as the cause of the existence of such a political uproar (Jeniri Amir, 2006). The effects of this argument also witnessed what was known as 'The Ming Court event 1987' where 27 SLA members formed 'Kumpulan Maju' (Success Group) and declared their loss of faith and trust in Taib's leadership. This clash also witnessed four Ministers and three Deputy Ministers submitting their resignations. Taib's decision to dissolve the SLA enabled him to regain power until today (Ahmad Nidzamuddin Sulaiman, 1994).

The Sarawak elections also brought about shocking speculation that there would be a new Chief Minister following the end of the Taib era. Sarawak had had Chief Ministers before Taib, them being Datuk Stephen Kalong Ningkan, Tawi Sli, Tun Abdul Rahman Yaakob and now Taib himself. This occurred ensuing the withdrawal of Dato' Sri Adenan Satem from the cabinet reshuffle done by the Prime Minister at

federal level. His experience as a magistrate and public prosecutor made him respectable and he had once been the 'middle man' in the internal political crises of Sarawak.

Similarly with BN's move which was seen as being in a comfort zone throughout the early part of this election campaign. BN only emphasised on the core importance of a cooperative relationship among all races and set aside any practices of the various groups. The opposition's strategy could also be seen as their attempt of competition in all 71 areas via the pact known as 'Barisan Bersatu Sarawak' (Sarawak United Coalition) involving two opposition parties, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Sarawak National Party (SNAP).

The opposition placed more emphasis on the issues of royalties and the hike of oil price as well as the lack of sugar supply during that point of time. The oil issue was the dominant issue as throughout the elections, the petroleum phenomena at the global level especially with the East Timor war still at its critical stage, was considered amongst the attracting factors which caused the hike in price. KeADILan (PKR) President, Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail in most of her speeches and orations touched on this issue as it was considered that Sarawak was paying more in its production of oil even though it was the supplier of the resource itself. In the opinion of BN, it was a dead-end issue as Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, de facto adviser of the PKR party, had before rejected Sarawak's plea when he held the position of Finance Minister then.

The opposition also used issues on development mainly on the relocation of the people residing in the squatter areas as accused of having almost 7,000 squatter houses in Miri but this was against the policy implementor as BN discovered it had to be endorsed in stages in order to enable the residents to acquire low-cost houses in a certain point of time and duration.

Besides that, the issue of development and land also became material for campaigns of the parties standing for elections. It was also fully utilised by the DAP who tried to instill the feeling of dissatisfaction by emphasizing the elements of 60 leases which should have ended in the year 2006. Many owners felt that they should have to pay 32-75% of the premium payment if they were to release their land especially in the municipal vicinity. As for the outskirts, the payment was expected to be approximately 25-35%.

All of these issues became material for the elections campaign. Although it was such for the supporters and leaders of BN, the actions of a handful of opposition leaders was considered weird and surprising as there were areas which saw the opposition placing candidates and there were such candidates from the opposition who believed they did not stand a chance in winning the elections. Although there were those of the opinion that BN would have an easy victory at the early stages of the elections campaign, many among the ring of observers were expecting an extraordinary result at the end.

ELECTORAL RESULTS

Several factors influenced the results of the 2006 elections. The table below presents the tally of the 2006 elections:

Table 1: Total Number of Seats Competed and Total Number of Seats Won

Party	Total Number of Seats Competed	Total Number of Seats Won
BN	71	62
PKR	25	1
SNAP	29	1
DAP	12	6
PAS	1	0
Independent	16	1

- BN won without competing seats N.50 Dalat and N.37 Daro

Source: *Mingguan Malaysia*, 14 May 2006 and *Sunday Star*, 21 May 2006

Although the results showed that BN had returned to power in Sarawak, the opposition had made a stunning surprise by winning nine seats from only having won two seats in the previous elections. BN regained its mandate by winning 62 out of the 71 seats competed but they received a great slap in the

duration of 19 years as if the event of 1987 had repeated itself whereby the opposition won 20 seats compared to BN with 28 seats.

BN's performance was tarnished with the loss of eight out of 19 seats competed by its component party SUPP while PRS lost one out of the nine seats being competed. This enabled the opposition to gain power in the area of Pending, Batu Lintang, Kota Sentosa, Bukit Assek, Kidurong, Meradong, Padungan, Engkilili and the independent candidate in Ngemah (Minguan Malaysia, 2006).

There were also several 'hot seats', for instance, the victory of PKR candidate Ng Kim Ho in N9 Padungan over BN-SUPP candidate Lily Yong Lee Lee. Yong also seemed to place the blame on the central government on the cause of the rise in oil price, and at that time was unable to overshadow the DAP campaign which focused on issues relating to the town area mainly issues with the Municipal Council, renewal of land lease and several other business. In the N12, BN candidate Datuk Yap Chin Loi was defeated by DAP candidate Chong Chieng Jen who was considered had won based on the factor of votes by the Chinese voters. The same was seen in the N29 Batang Al constituency which mirrored the clash between two personalities, them being Dublin Unting Ingkot (BN-PRS) and Nicholas Bawin (SNAP) and ending with victory for the BN candidate, N40 constituency was also an attraction to many in witnessing the fight between two young candidates although there were also three other independent candidates. The outcome was victory to Ting Tze Fui (DAP) over Wong Zee Yeng (BN-SUPP). Taib (BN-PBB) however maintained his Balingian seat by defeating Ibrahim Bayau (PKR) (New Sunday Times, 2006). N.26 constituency witnessed the fall of Datuk Seri Daniel Tajem (SNAP) who was standing in order to regain his seat which was instead passed on to Mong Dagang (BN-PRS) as Daniel Tajem had been in BN before his party was faced with internal problems. This was considered a popular seat as it was called the 'hot seat' among the Iban community.

Several factors can be taken apart to give justification upon the victory of the opposition mainly DAP. Among them is BN's attitude of being over-confident with their previous win. This was followed with BN's posters hardly being seen in certain areas as well as only speeches and talks among the BN supporters were done on a small scale. The results on the night of May 20th proved that although voters still preferred BN to be in power, they also gave votes in protest in several areas which were won by the opposition.

DAP had before won three seats in Pelawan, Kidurong and Bukit Assek during the 1996 elections and their then Chairman, Richard Wong Ho Leng had defeated the then President of SUPP, Tan Sri Wong Soon Kai. DAP's success this time round was focused on areas where the majority was made up of Chinese voters. They won six seats compared to the one seat in the previous elections. This included the SLA area in Kuching, Sibul and Bintulu, that is Meradong, Bukit Assek, Pending, Kota Sentosa, and Engkilili and maintained the Kidurong seat. The opposition also decreased the majority BN candidates of about 200 – 1,500 votes.

Two important factors as stated above, them being issues pertaining to land and oil were the key points to BN's defeat in several areas. For the land leasers, they assumed that they were required to pay a large amount as premium on the account that they wanted their land to be leased out again. Most of the Chinese voters were the owners of these lands. Although BN had repeatedly stated that the people's land would not be taken or confiscated, the opposition candidate exploited the premium issue and utilized it as a stepping tone to win the confidence of the voters in several areas.

A similar situation with the issue of the increase in the price of oil. The opposition was rather consistent in their campaign and caused a confusion by posing the question as to why the people of Sarawak were required to suffer due to the hike in oil price when in actual fact they were the biggest producer and supplier of oil and gas in the country. This was no doubt DAP's game under their manifesto based on the concept 'Enough is Enough' and 'Sarawak Deserves Better' whereby the government was expected to bear the responsibility by announcing their final decision on amending the Sarawak Land Act, thus allowing the lease of land to be renewed automatically on its own upon the expiry of the lease. The voters found it difficult to accept BN's response as many of them needed to use oil and gas for their businesses and transportation. This issue trapped SUPP especially as the party was supposedly one that protected and upheld the rights and interests of the Chinese community in Sarawak.

The voting pattern amongst the Chinese community was hard to ascertain. This was because in the precious elections, strong support was given to SUPP but this time their support veered towards DAP.

Several main candidates of SUPP such as Datuk Sim Kheng Hui dan Datuk Alfred Yap were defeated. This was an indirect message being sent to the leadership of SUPP informing them that the Chinese voters had to be given more attention and priority in their interests and not to create any form of development at anytime. SUPP also needed to take note of the opposition candidate's ability to manipulate issues based on their backgrounds. The 'house to house' campaign strategy and emphasis on small problems should be made an example. Candidates with 'red report cards' especially those within the grade F (fail) politicians category needed to be dropped and substituted or replaced with a candidate who had a clean record and suitability with the surrounding local area. SUPP which was the representative of the Chinese community needed to perform a post-mortem on their bad performance in this elections, whatmore with the defeats of two candidates supposedly the successors of the President, Deputy Chief Minister George Chan, that is Tan Sri Dr Wong Soo Kai and Tan Sri Stephen Yong.

The results of the Sarawak State elections also made a rather big impact at the central government level mainly the voting pole of the Chinese community. Similarly with the issues brought forward by the opposition as well as issues pertaining to the replacement of the leaders in the party. The relationship link through the marriage of George Chan's daughter and Taib's son could assist in healing and rejuvenating the motivation of SUPP in the near future. There was also rumours after the elections that PRS and SPDP would combine with each having won eight seats respectively, and thier collaboration would cause SUPP to have only eleven seats thus losing their popularity as the second strongest after PBB. Nevertheless the combination of both parties would never happen as each was faced with internal conflicts which would most certainly prolong. PBB still maintained its power by winning all the seats that they had stood for, and only the issue of the Chief Minister's replacement becoming the party President still haunts them.

This trend of voting needs to be fully analysed in detail as it could leave a rather big impact and effect on the upcoming general elections especially in the urban and city areas and it all depends on the readiness of SUPP and other BN component parties to face the old and current issues in order to avoid an outcome similar to that of the staet elections to reoccur in the general elections. The opposition will also form strategies which will continue to shake the position of the governing party regardless of being aware that the voting pole will not remain permanently the same way and that iys performance not necessarily static as seen in the 2006 elections.

The 2006 performance and 1987 Ming Court Event act as if wanting to give an alternative voice in the SLA. The echoes and voices of the Chinese voters need to be taken into account and regarded as a signal to the party which is still prolonging their internal issues and give opportunity to look into the interest of these voters. The new generation possesses a different outlook and zest in the more condusive atmosphere of today. Their roles need to be acknowledged and given opportunity to look into their respective capabilities in order to gain the support of their generation.

CONCLUSION

Although many regard the results of this elections as a side-track from the performance of the 2001 elections, however BN still continues to receive its mandate to administer and lead the state of Sarawak. Nevertheless, the large victory witnessed in the 2001 elections was not as noticeable in the elections this time. Voters were aware that they would not experience any development if they were to vote for the opposition but a new trend emerged to cast protest votes in order to form a balance in the political participation at the planning and implementing of policies of the state SLA. In actual fact, the next state elections which should be held very soon will become a large bet to see as to how far the Sarawak BN component parties will succeed in preventing the opposition or to continue becoming a liability to the overall image and performance of BN at the state government level before the nation's General Elections speculated to be held in year 2012.

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