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Socio-Political trends in Sarawak

Michael Leigh.

Paper presented at the Sarawak Cultural Symposium II, held in conjunction with the 30th anniversary of Sarawak as part of Malaysia, 13th May 1993.

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Socio-political trends can be examined from a variety of perspectives. A simple example was once given by one of my teachers, when he brought into class a box of breakfast cereal, to the very first lecture, and said, "do you understand what this breakfast cereal is?" The answer seemed quite easy. "You read the side of the packet where the ingredients are listed." However on the side there were three analyses of what was inside. There was the analysis according to nutritional value - which is one way of breaking up the internal constituents. There was another analysis in terms of calorific value and the third analysis was in terms of its chemical composition. So this seemingly simple thing, a breakfast cereal, could in fact be looked at in three quite different ways. How much more so with something that is as complex and as interesting as a society, and one with so many cultures within it.

Culture is something that is not static at all. It is something that is dynamic, that can be developed, that can be nurtured. It is also something that can be used positively or negatively. We can presently see a number of harsh examples in the Balkans, particularly in the components of what was previously Yugoslavia, where cultural identity can in fact be used for what are essentially evil purposes.

So, culture is dynamic, it is something which can be developed, and it is also something that can be manipulated. In the first session there was a very interesting discussion regarding the categories that are used to define groups in Sarawak. The categories of

Dayak,¹ as distinct from Iban, were discussed in the context of the desirability or the likelihood of ethnic exclusivity in relation to political parties. I shall come back to that later.

How would those trained in political science and economics examine trends in socio-political development? They would look at political parties and elections, the legislature, and they would look at control of resources. They would examine the trajectory of these over time. They would also focus on the nature of the state, and on centre-periphery relations. In Sarawak this means an examination of the federal relationship. Now that Sarawak has celebrated its 30th anniversary it is highly appropriate to focus on the changed nature of the federal-state relationship, in particular to examine how those changes have affected Sarawak, and how and why the relationship has changed. That entails a close analysis of its political economy, a domain that has exercised my mind to quite a strong degree.

Let us take, as the starting point, the period when Sarawak joined to form the new nation-state, Malaysia. Then the political scene in Sarawak consisted of six political parties.

First was the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP). Founded in 1959, it was then a left wing militant multiracial party that pressed for independence for Sarawak, and was very wary about the proposal for Sarawak to gain independence through forming Malaysia. Most SUPP activists at that time opposed merger with Malaya. After the outbreak of the Brunei revolt, in December 1962, a great many non-Chinese members of that political party were persuaded to resign from SUPP, leaving it a much less balanced multi-racial party, with instead a much stronger Chinese identification.

Second on the scene was *Parti Negara Sarawak* (PANAS) which was led by prominent Malay aristocrats, most of whom had worked closely with the British colonial

¹In this paper we shall follow original Dutch usage and employ the term 'Dayak' to cover all non-Muslim indigenous people, or Bumiputra. The major Dayak groups are Iban, Bidayuh, Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit and Penan. Local usage categorizes the latter four communities under the identifier 'orang ulu'.

administration. Initially PANAS also included prestigious figures from the Dayak and Chinese communities, but they subsequently left to join other parties.

The third party was the Sarawak National Party (SNAP) which was led by Iban from the Saribas river, many of whom had experienced life in the oil fields. It was led by people who were fairly mobile, those who had come from the Saribas but had moved, *bejalai*, and many of whom had set up their homes in and around Brunei. SNAP attracted certain Chinese leaders, who in time came to play an increasingly influential or dominant role within the party.

The fourth party was BARJASA (*Barisan Rakyat Jati Sarawak*) which was led by Muslims who were disaffected by the establishment orientation of the PANAS leadership. Allegations were spread that particular leaders of PANAS had benefited from the cession of Sarawak to the British Crown. That issue of cession had rent asunder the Malay community. This rift was finally patched organisationally in 1967 when PANAS and BARJASA merged to form *Parti Bumiputra*.

Parti PESAKA Sarawak, the fifth major political party was led by Iban of the Rejang River basin, by the late Tun Temenggong Jugah -- who fervently sought recognition as the paramount chief of the Iban. Tun Temenggong Jugah was concerned about inroads by SNAP, so left PANAS to lead this new predominantly Iban party. In the early 1970s PESAKA joined with *Parti Bumiputra* to form PBB, *Pesaka Bumiputra Bersatu*.

The sixth political party was the Sarawak Chinese Association (SCA) which was modeled directly upon the Malayan Chinese Association. It was the only one of those six parties that had an explicitly racial charter. It was led by Chinese of the Foochow and Teochew dialect groups, whereas initially the key SUPP leaders were from the Hakka and Hokkien dialect groups. SCA ceased to exist just before the 1974 elections, SUPP being unwilling to countenance its continuance as part of the state Barisan.