

THE 2021 SARAWAK STATE ELECTION AND DAYAK POLITICS: DAYAKISM, DEVELOPMENT AND DIVISION

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the performance of the candidates and political parties contesting in the Dayak-majority constituencies in the 2021 Sarawak State Election. It explains why, despite the promotion of Dayak issues by Parti Sarawak Bersatu (PSB) and Parti Bumi Kenyalang (PBK) and the presence of ethnonationalist parties such as the Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak Baru (PBDSB), the Dayak continued to support the ruling Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS). The article argues that the success of GPS in securing the Dayak support can be attributed to three reasons: first, GPS's ability in accentuating the "Sarawak First" sentiment among the Dayak; second, the ruling coalition's ability in dispensing tangible development and economic benefits to the Dayak; and third, the political division among the Dayak which weakened their representation and influence outside of GPS. In the larger scheme of things, even though the theory of ethnic party competition can be used to explain the growth and survival of ethnic-based parties and ethnic politics in West Malaysia, it is only partially applicable in Sarawak, as the dynamics of the Dayak politics shows.

Keywords: Sarawak State Election, Dayak, Dayak politics, Dayakism, development

INTRODUCTION

The Dayak accounts for 40% of Sarawak's total population. The term Dayak refers loosely to Sarawak's main indigenous group comprising the Iban, Bidayuh and Orang Ulu. The Orang Ulu or "upriver people" represents Sarawak's minority ethnic groups living mainly in the interior areas. The Orang Ulu consists of the Kelabit, Kenyah (including Sebop, Seping, Kiput, Badang and Berawan) Bukitan, Bisaya, Kayan, Kajang (including Sekapan, Kejaman, Lahanan, Punan, Tanjong and Kanowit), Lugat Lisum, Lun Bawang, Penan, Sian, Tabun, Ukit and Saban (Seling and Langub 1989, 35, cited in Jehom 1999, 83–98). The Iban is the largest ethnic group at 28.89%, followed by the Bidayuh (8.04%) and the Orang Ulu (6.33%) (Table 1). Due to their population size, obtaining the support of the Dayak is crucial for the state's political elites—more so as no ethnic group in Sarawak can command a majority and can form the government on its own.

In the 2016 Sarawak State Election (SSE16), out of the 34 Dayak-majority seats, the then Barisan Nasional (BN) Sarawak, led by Adenan Satem, won all the 21 Iban-majority seats, seven Bidayuh-majority seats, and four Orang Ulu-majority seats. Sarawak BN under Adenan was so popular that it garnered more than 60% of the Iban and Bidayuh votes and more than half of the Orang Ulu votes. The opposition could only settle with less than 40% of the popular votes in the Dayak-majority areas.

However, Sarawak BN's exceptional performance in the Dayak-majority constituencies was dented after losing six Dayak-majority parliamentary seats to the opposition in the 14th General Election of 2018, paving the way for Pakatan Harapan's (PH) component parties—Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Democratic Action Party (DAP)—to strengthen their foothold on Sarawak politics. The six seats were Selangau, Saratok, Julau, Lubok Antu, Puncak Borneo and Mas Gading. The Sarawak BN's defeat in these areas was "unusual" given its dominance in Sarawak's rural constituencies for decades. Sarawak BN's loss was attributed to internal infighting, Native Customary Land (NCR) issues,¹ impacts of national politics on voters' sentiments, and the role of social media (Mersat 2018). The opposition's breakthrough in Sarawak in the 14th General Election not only weakened Sarawak BN but also raised doubts about its future in local politics.

Adenan's successor, Abang Johari Openg (or Abang Jo as he is popularly known), moved to disassociate the ruling local political elites from their federal coalition partners by forming Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) comprising all the former Sarawak BN component parties: Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Sarawak