

## **PAKATAN HARAPAN'S PERFORMANCE IN THE 2021 SARAWAK STATE ELECTION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article aims to examine the performance of Pakatan Harapan (PH) in the 2021 Sarawak State Election (SSE21). It explains the three main reasons for PH's dismal showing. First, local-based political parties took advantage of structural weaknesses in Sarawak PH and managed to convince Sarawakians that state rights could only be protected by political entities controlled by Sarawak leaders. Second, the "Sarawak First" sentiment changed the political landscape of Sarawak and increased the sense of solidarity among Sarawakians. It was the driving force behind the campaign messages of the local-based political parties that resonated well among the majority of the Sarawakian voters. Third, the three PH coalition parties in Sarawak, namely Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH) did not have a common political ideology to bind them together, strengthening the common belief that DAP, PKR and AMANAH came together simply out of convenience to gain power. In order to survive in Sarawak, PH needs to rebuild its image and political strategies relevant to the needs of the Sarawakians voters. This article is based on data from online media sources and observations made during the election on 18 December 2021.*

**Keywords:** Sarawak State Election, Pakatan Harapan, Gabungan Parti Sarawak, coalition parties, opposition parties

## **INTRODUCTION**

The 2021 Sarawak State Election (SSE21) which was held on 18 December 2021 marked a significant event for all Sarawakians. The long-overdue state election was a much-awaited event for Sarawakians after it was suspended due to the nationwide emergency to curb the spread of COVID-19. The emergency, which was in effect from 12 January 2021 to 1 August 2021 nationwide, was only lifted on 3 November 2021 for Sarawak after the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Al-Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatuddin Al-Mustafa Billah Shah revoked the order. It meant that the Sarawak State Legislative Assembly (SLA) was shelved for about six months after being dissolved automatically on 7 June 2021.

The SSE21 witnessed Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) winning a landslide in the election, sweeping 76 out of the 84 seats in the SLA compared to 67 out of the 82 seats during the previous state election. With the resounding election result, GPS has yet again succeeded in securing a supermajority over the SLA, a result that the coalition has achieved for over three decades. The heat was high as all parties started gearing up for the much-awaited state-wide poll. The SSE21 saw 82 seats for grabs to elect the new 19th SLA members. The state election saw an increase of 120 contesting candidates (about 52% increase), compared to only 229 candidates in the 2016 Sarawak State Election (SSE16) resulting in a whopping 349 candidates vying for the 82 seats of the SLA.

There was intense contest throughout the state, as the electoral contest revealed growing regional parties in coalitions in Sarawak. Out of 10 contesting parties or coalitions, only two were national-based. Pakatan Harapan (PH) contested 62 seats, while Perikatan Nasional (PN) contested one seat. The four largest parties contesting were GPS, contesting in all 82 seats; Parti Sarawak Bersatu (PSB) contesting in 70 seats; PH contesting in 62 seats; and Parti Bumi Kenyalang (PBK) contesting in 73 seats. Clearly, the regional approach was the central theme for the election as all local-based parties each brought forward their own definition of Sarawak regionalism (Weiss and Puyok 2017). With a growing sense of regional autonomy permeating the electoral contest, PH seemed to lag compared to the rest of the competing parties. It was believed that Sarawakians would rather support a Sarawak-based party than a national-based one, as regional identity politics started to catch the attention of Sarawakians.

The state-based coalition proved to be too strong for its opposition. The SSE21 saw the national-based opposition coalition of Sarawak, PH—previously the most prominent opposition in the state—suffer a painful defeat. The coalition won only two seats in the state-wide poll through its component party, Democratic Action