POLITICAL BREAKTHROUGH IN A RURAL COMMUNITY DURING THE 2011 SARAWAK STATE ELECTION: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on empirical data and ethnographic evidence as a springboard to explore issues affecting narratives and observations made during the 2011 Sarawak State Election. It throws light on ways in which communities and cultures at the periphery of the Malaysian nation state grapple with the potentials and consequences of elections in the process of economic, political and social transformation. Eschewing aspects of candidates' selections, electoral campaign process and actual voting behaviour of individual voters, the main analysis is of the formulation of local understandings and meanings of the state elections in two rural settlements of Ba' Kelalan and Bario located close to the border between Sarawak and Kalimantan. This article suggests that an account of their experiences is a necessity in order to understand what functions and whose interest elections serve, and most importantly what election actually does and means within particular circumstances of local history. As a political phenomenon, elections can look different from the perspective of those close to the centre of power in contrast to those with little power within a political hierarchy.

Keywords: Sarawak state election, ethnographic perspective, local understanding and election practices, rural voting behaviour, indigenous communities, national elections

INTRODUCTION

After the polls had closed on Sarawak's 10th State Election on 16th April 2011, many were surprised by the news that Baru Bian had been elected as the State Legislative Assembly member for the Ba' Kelalan constituency, located in the highlands of northeastern Sarawak. Ba' Kelalan has been a stronghold of Barisan Nasional (BN). During the election cycles of 1996 and 2001, BN won without contestation (Faisal 2012, 176). Although there was a contestation in the 2004 by election, BN still won; likewise, the state election in 2006 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Ba' Kelalan (N70) election outcomes 1996–2011

Year	Candidates		Winner
1996 (N62)	Judson Sakai (BN)	No contest	BN
2001	Judson Sakai (BN)	No contest	BN
2004 (by-election)	Nelson Balang Rining (BN)	Baru Bian (Independent)	BN
2006	Nelson Balang Rining (BN)	Baru Bian (SNAP)	BN
2011	Willie Liaw (BN)	Baru Bian (PKR)	PKR

Note: SNAP = Sarawak National Party; PKR = Parti Keadilan Rakyat

In 2011, there was an increase in turnout of voters from 3,680 in 2006 to 4,585. If in 2006, BN won 56.50% of the votes, and the opposition party garnered 43.50% in 2011, BN-Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) gained only 44.79%, while Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) mustered 55.21% of the votes. Table 2 highlights the outcome and indicates a significant deviation from the norm in the Ba' Kelalan constituency.

Table 2: N70 election results of 2006 and 2011

Voters	2006		2011	
	BN	SNAP	BN	PKR
Registered electors	6,284		6,958	
Total valid votes	3,653		4,537	
Turnout %	58.56 (3,680)		65.90 (4,585)	
Total	2,064	1,589	2,032	2,505
(%)	56.50	43.50	44.79	55.21

One thing that made Baru Bian's victory stand out from other PKR colleagues: his riding was far remote and rural. Prior to this PKR held only one seat in the State Legislative Assembly and had not been able to win a single seat in rural Sarawak.

Its caucus was mainly urban with its members drawn from Sarawak's big towns and cities. As will be described, the 2011 Sarawak State Election (SSE) defined how people voted for in subsequent elections. Baru Bian went on to win the SSEs in 2016 and 2021 despite being an opposition candidate.

The 2011 SSE results raised several questions, yet few explanations have been provided for how people voted in the Ba' Kelalan constituency in 2011. There was the question of whether the win represented a crack in the BN shield in rural Sarawak; on another level was also the question whether there was an awakening of new politics amongst two rural communities, namely the Kelabit and Lun Bawang. This is especially with regard to the diminishing effects of politics of development in defining election results in rural Sarawak.

These questions need to be addressed for two reasons. Foremost, to examine the significance of elections for minority groups whose political opportunities and constraints are not only structured by macro level factors such as the electoral system and the organisation of political parties but also by their electoral numbers and their remote locations from corridors of power in Putrajaya and Kuching. Second, how do these situations shape the formulation of local understandings and experiences with elections? In what ways do small communities participate in elections and make it work for their interests, and likewise what interests in the communities can it serve? These questions are important to explore in the context of growing concerns that parties and legislatures be inclusive and representative of the broader society.

With that, the article is organised as follows. The first section sketches a brief literature overview on meanings of election in different contexts. The second section highlights some sociological features common to the Kelabit and Lun Bawang and how these have led to peripheral situations for them. The third section describes the creation of the N70 seat in 1996, and the outcome of subsequent elections until the 2011 SSE. The next section describes how small communities negotiate partisanship and group appeals that define national and state elections within particular historical, cultural and political contexts. Oftentimes, local based and micro-level factors, such as performance of civic-oriented leaders, their personal connections to voters, deep community ties and community powers and norms, tend to be more important than the macro level factors. The article argues that explanations of voting patterns need to consider local level dynamics and social issues for they shape voters' perceptions and electoral behaviour.

FRAMING MEANINGS OF ELECTIONS

Elections, common practices through which leaders are elected to public offices have been a focus of study by many scholars. Janda, Goldman and Berry (1992, 259) characterise elections as an institutionalised access to political power and a bolster to state's power and authority. Anifowose (2003, 24) describes elections as a means to recruit politicians and public decision-makers, to create governments, to provide representation, to influence policy decisions, to build legitimacy, to strengthen the elites, to provide succession in leadership and to extend participation to many people. For some others, election is simply an institutional mechanism for citizens to choose among candidates or issues (Ojo 2007, 7). Recent works by Morgenbesser and Pepinsky (2019) and Chambers and Ufen (2020) highlight the links between elections, democracy and the values of elections to the ruling elites for political legitimacy.

Within this corpus of literature, very little attention is paid to the ways in which indigenous communities and small cultures within nations grapple with the roles and implications of elections in their own cultural contexts and local processes. This might be for a number of reasons. Their number is small and of no consequence in the wider scheme of things. Furthermore, they are physically far removed from the centres of power and development in urban areas. In addition, the sociological characteristics of their constituencies, and their limited power because of the absence of pressure groups or lobbies. On the part of indigenous communities, naturally, their remote locations and fewer numbers can lead to cynicism when it comes to politics: why should they bother to participate in elections when there is little confidence about outcomes of elections? Yet minority groups can be hidden Leviathan of politics, especially in places like Sarawak. The rural areas account for 46% of Sarawak's population. Many still survive on the rural economy for daily subsistence. Their rural social and political organisations are capable of representing the diverse interests of rural voices and therefore carry possibilities for grassroots political change.

However, there is relatively little systematic explanations on how Sarawakians in the smaller villages and longhouses cast their votes in national elections. The current explanations of voting behaviour, which focus on urban-based areas that often hinge on partisanship, ideology, and group appeals are ill suited for most elections in rural settings. Even though there have been efforts, for instance by Antlöv (2021), Taylor (1996a) and Nelson (1998) to highlight the crucial differences between local, state and national level elections in Southeast Asia, still distinct styles of electoral politics amongst indigenous communities are generally overlooked and not given credence.

In response, this article explores some distinct dynamics of politics and society in rural settings in Bario and Ba' Kelalan. After Hoskins (1987, 606), it explores variation in meanings, experiences, historicities, debates, and specificities of national and state elections but amongst minority groups located far from the corridors of political and economic power in Kuching and Putrajaya.

In his excellent introduction on the roles of elections in Southeast Asia, Taylor (1996b, 8) noted, "as a political phenomenon, elections can look different from the perspective of those in power at the top and those with little or no power at the bottom of the political hierarchy." Echoing his sentiments, this article sheds light on experiences and specificities of indigenous and minority groups—the Kelabit and Lun Bawang—to explore what purpose can national elections serve in their given situations. This is to examine how elections and socialcultural forces such as ethnic background, local history, kinship relations, religious beliefs and faith, existence of competing visions within local communities, characteristics of individual candidates and the nature of their ties to a given ethnic community are negotiated. As noted by Puyok (2006, 214) giving attention to the Ba' Kelalan seat provides a window into indigenous politics in Sarawak, and in this case their formulation of local understandings and experiences with general elections.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT: THE KELABIT AND LUN BAWANG

The Kelabit and the Lun Bawang traditionally inhabit the highlands of northeastern Sarawak, located at the frontier borders between Kalimantan and Sarawak. The highlands are surrounded by some of the highest and most rugged terrains in the region. Therefore, within the contemporary political geography of Malaysia, the regions are considered far removed from the centres of power both at the national and state levels.

Linguistically and culturally the Lun Bawang and the Kelabit are two closely related ethnic groups (LeBar 1972, 153). Over the years due to historical processes, the Kelabit and Lun Bawang have developed into two distinct ethnic groups. Even so, they maintain strong political and economic ties; through which each group continues to contribute to the livelihood of the other (Bala 2001).

The following are some sociological features of the Kelabit and Lun Bawang, which have set them apart from many other ethnic groups in Sarawak:

1. Traditionally longhouse-based communities, kinship relations play dominant roles in their social and political relations.

2. Until the coming of Christianity, the Kelabit and Lun Bawang practiced a stratification system, which is the basis of leadership structure in the community.

3. The Kelabit and Lun Bawang are farming communities with rice as their main crop. Reciprocal norms and rotation system ensure mutual assistance practices in sustaining their farms.

4. Most members of the communities are devout Christians with the church playing an important role as a mediator in any disagreements that threaten their communal life at the village level.

5. Within Malaysia's cultural and political contexts, the Kelabit and Lun Bawang are numerically inferior to other groups in Malaysia.

It was partly these sociological features which contributed to the creation of the Ba' Kelalan constituency in 1996. Puyok (2006, 214) noted that the boundary delineation exercise gave the two indigenous groups a majority seat. Prior to the creation of N70, the Kelabit were voting with the Kayan and Kenyah in Telang Usan in Baram, while the Lun Bawang were voting with the Malays in Lawas. Because their numbers are small, there was a slim chance for either of the groups to gain a representative in the State Legislative Assembly. All this led to discussions and delineation of a constituency that can provide "majority" status for the Lun Bawang and Kelabit.

The delineation was politically meaningful for them. As pointed out by Welsh (2006, 3) "the most important feature shaping Sarawakian politics is ethnicity, its demography… [whereby] political parties, political mobilisation and campaign issues are organised along these ethnic cleavages as is the delineation of electoral constituencies, yielding different representation for different communities."

Welsh's claim is made clear through Table 3. Over the years, allocation of seats in the state has been aligned along ethnic lines—only three seats out of 71 seats had been allocated to Orang Ulu and one of which is the Ba' Kelalan seat.

Table 3: Sarawak seat allocation by ethnicity

Ethnic group	1970		1987		1996/2001		2006	
	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%
Malay/Melanau	11	25.0	12	33.3	22	40.3	16	22.5
Iban	23	58.3	17	37.5	15	27.4	16	22.5
Bidayuh	–	–	4	8.3	4	6.5	5	7.0

Table 3: (continued)

Ethnic group	1970		1987		1996/2001		2006	
	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%
Orang Ulu	–	–	2	4.2	3	4.8	3	4.2
Chinese	7	16.7	7	16.7	12	20.9	11	15.5
Mixed	–	–	–	–	–	–	20	28.2
Total	41	100.0	42	100.0	56	100.0	71	100.0

Source: Welsh (2006, 7)

The delineation is also significant in light of two "peripheral situations" they have to grapple with. Foremost is Malaysia's ethnic-based competition for resources (Shamsul 1986; Jomo 1985; Jawan and King 2004; Ahmad Fauzi and Zawawi 2017). Foremost is the essence of Malay-ness as the foundation of the Malaysian nation-state; hence, positioning the Malays at the top of the hierarchy (Goh 2002, 186).

MULTIPLE PERIPHERALITY AND MEANINGS OF DEVELOPMENT

Arguably the multiple peripherality situations as experienced by many rural indigenous communities are conducive for politics of development, as described by Loh (1997), Aeria (1997) and Faisal (2009), to thrive in Sarawak as Foucauldian forms of power and governmentality. Echoing Tremewan (1994, 74–108), development projects and packages can be transformed into means for social control for national goals during election cycles. They can be used instrumentally by regimes to demonstrate strengths and fish for votes.

Concurrently, because of the existing asymmetrical power relations and inter-ethnic disparities there is a desire amongst minority groups for strategies appropriate for political recognition by the government. This has defined their engagement in articulating a collective political agency in the Malaysian state. Election, although a non-indigenous socialising political activity, becomes an occasion to shore up their respective economic, social and political interests as minority groups.

Hence, functions required of elections in formal democratic theory could look different from the experiences of those at the margins. Rather than seen as the *sine qua non* of good government in democratic society, elections are means to use voting power to ensure that candidates who bring more development projects will win an election. Small indigenous groups like the Kelabit and Lun Bawang are aware of this and express the sentiment in speeches made during election cycles

such as "if we don't vote for the government [ruling party] then there will be no development projects given to us," and, "if the government does not promise to give us development projects, then there is no use voting for its candidate." While development is used to fish for votes, concurrently, elections are used as occasions to hold government accountable for the promises of "development."

These lines were common in 1996, but more so in the 2004 by-election and SSE in 2006. The former was held due to the untimely death of its assemblyman, Datuk Dr. Judson Sakai. The issue of candidacy placed the Kelabit and Lun Bawang in a quandary. This was because there was doubt over the suitability of the proposed BN candidate. Since a noble background and educational achievements were considered important criteria for a community representative, some claimed the nominated candidate did not fit the communities' expectations. Yet, there was awareness that the candidate's links with the ruling party were valuable connections for channeling more development into the region. The fact that the candidate won the election, despite being challenged by another candidate who fulfilled all the local requirements but was a member of the opposition party, suggests that the communities had voted in someone who can bring about more economic development. Conversely, ensuring more development projects for the highlands had a bearing on which candidate and political party won the election. It was on the heels of 2006 SSE that the 10th state election, which is the focus of this study, was carried out.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on empirical data and ethnographic evidence as a springboard to examine narratives gathered and observations made during the 2011 SSE. Ethnographic evidence from frequent visits over 15 years because of research activities, namely the eBario initiative (1999 to 2004) in Bario and eBaKelalan project (2009 to 2019) in Ba' Kelalan are also included.

According to Auyero and Joseph (2007, 2),

> Ethnography is uniquely equipped to look microscopically at the foundations of political institutions and their attendant sets of practices, just as it is ideally suited to explain why political actors behave the way they do and to identify the causes, processes, and outcomes that are part and parcel of political life.

Shah (2007, 12) made similar arguments. He suggests that since studying micro-level factors requires deep familiarity with local politics, "a fieldworker who knows the community is better equipped to capture that reality."

Arguably, a great strength of ethnography is its ability to generate empirical data, which otherwise would not feed into scientific thinking and political analysis. Lama-Rewal (2009, 3) notes, "anthropological studies are usually focused on a more limited political territory (typically, the village), and more importantly, they are centered on questioning the meaning of the electoral process for voters: why do people vote? More precisely, why do they bother, what is the meaning of voting for them?". Stepputat and Larsen (2015, 6) further clarify this position: ethnography is "the science of contextualisation". By contextualising narratives and observations made during the 2011 SSE, they clarify and contribute as a lens through which to uncover the qualities of particular political trajectories amongst the Kelabit and Lun Bawang people.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

Election 2011: A Mixed Bag of Response

In a conversation with a 26-year-old male from Ba' Kelalan, immediately after the announcement of Baru Bian's win, he quipped,

> Even though PKR has won, I am quite sure BN will win in the next round of election here. It was good that they lost this time round – otherwise our roads will never get built. They will not pay attention to our situations. At least with this loss they now will pay attention to our needs and concerns. We will from now on have better roads. (P1)

Yet, another respondent with outspoken disappointment said,

> I have never liked elections. I don't like it at all because it is so divisive. It divides families and friends. It divides our communities. It divides the church. It creates confusion among the villagers. Our community life suffers so much because of election. (P2)

Another 54-year-old informant describes the 2011 SSE as the most challenging election in his capacity as a ground coordinator for the BN political machinery in the area. He said,

> It has been a very unnerving experience because right from the beginning the chances of BN winning the Ba' Kelalan seat was 40–60. So many VIPs and big guns visited the area. All I wanted was for BN to win so our area can be developed. This is the time. Once our area is fully developed with all the basic amenities—I myself will be an activist—fighting for our land rights. (P3)

An 80-year-old village leader provides yet another perspective. He said,

> Our Yang Berhormats (YBs) are often replaced anyhow they [head of BN] want. Sometimes the candidate is only given two to three days' notice to prepare. To me, this is a sign that there is a lack of respect for us as people, plus it portrays a form of control by others on small minority groups like ours. People voted to protest this kind of treatment. (P4)

The above statements reflect a mixed bag of response to PKR's win in Ba' Kelalan. The first was expressed by a young man who has been longing for public goods in the forms of better basic infrastructure (water and electricity supply) and good roads in his rural village in the highlands (P1). Meanwhile, a 60-year-old pastor made the second statement. As a spiritual leader, he has been a church pastor for over four decades and has travelled intensively in rural areas to inculcate kindred and caring attitudes amongst Christian communities. His statement suggests that if the political arena overheats, there is a tendency for the contest to spill over into local and religious institutions that normally would mediate and soften political disagreement (P2). Meanwhile, the third statement was made by a prominent local and grassroots leader and an entrepreneur who has been involved in local party politics since he was 25 years old (P3). He has been instrumental in mobilising local communities towards having a common vision and goals for the benefits of the local communities both in Bario and Ba' Kelalan. Meanwhile, P4 is a well-known village leader from a prominent family. The family has been involved in state and national politics for many years. In different times, his children have been involved as election candidates.

These after-effect vignettes bring into focus a few situations with regard to particular political trajectories amongst the Kelabit and Lun Bawang people and how these issues play out in the 2011 SSE. Two main trajectories can be identified. One is "keep BN in power" to ensure material benefits reach the constituency. The other goes beyond infrastructure-based vision. It represented new consciousness and aspirations among some voters for greater democratic practices and for representatives who will play prominent roles in civil society and social movements.

Development Promises and Infrastructure-based Vision during the 2011 SSE

Puyok (2006, 14–15) noted that three main issues that defined the 2006 SSE in the Ba' Kelalan constituency were still pertinent in 2011, though more nuanced. These are development aspirations, native customary rights over land, and the position of Christianity in the communities. These are mainly to ensure material benefits reach the constituency as expressed by P1 and P3.

The comments suggest that development promises during the election cycle take on particular meanings to the Kelabit and Lun Bawang communities in Bario and Ba' Kelalan. That is, elections provide a means to negotiate for development projects to "reach" the Kelabit and Lun Bawang homelands. This is important because, physically, N70 encompasses a wide area as big as Perlis in Peninsular Malaysia, but is sparsely populated and has a relatively small number of voters (6,958 voters). In a sense, as a constituency, Ba' Kelalan presents a challenge to any political representative; it entails more time, energy and resources.

According to Faisal (2012, 176), "the allocation of development projects during the election period is varied according to the threat posed by the opposition in the affected communities." In 2011, this was reflected through promises of development made to the constituency during the then Prime Minister's trips. During his visit, the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak promised several development projects. Most prominent were road building between Lawas-Ba' Kelalan, Bario-Miri and Bario-Ba' Kelalan.

Conversely, as inferred from P1 and P3, development promises during election period work both ways: to fish for votes and also used by voters to assess the ruling party. For P1 the loss of BN is a good thing so that the government will build the road; on the other hand, for P3, a win by BN will allow development projects to enter. Both ways, the voting power is used to ensure the coming of development in the form of bigger and better bridges, roads, clinics, electricity supply, etc. Jomo (1996, 97) notes, "elections in Malaysia has ensured a degree of holding leaders accountable for their actions to at least deliver some public goods."

Its failure to fulfill these obligations will lead to the government becoming a target of gossip, criticism and murmuring (Scott 1985); not simply a strategy to resist dominance, but is used as a yardstick to measure the state's commitment, obligations and its use of power in areas like the highlands. This resonates with Crouch's (1996, 113) claims that "the electoral process in Malaysia does contribute in an important way to making the Malaysian government responsive to some

extent at least, to pressures from the community." In 2011, this was made clear from comments made by P1 and P3.

It was from this perspective that the Ba' Kelalan seat, previously seen as peripheral to national politics, took on great significance as a potential "swing" region. This was made clear through the number of visits made to Bario and Ba' Kelalan by BN's "big guns" during the campaign period. The Ba' Kelalan constituency became the focus of much campaigning and strategising by the BN. Most prominent were the visits made by the then Prime Minister to Bario and Ba' Kelalan on 14th April 2011 and the Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation Malaysia Dato' Seri Max Ongkili to Ba' Kelalan on 10th April 2011.

Competing Vision and Candidacy Drama

Having said all that, statements by respondents P1, P3 and P4 reflect a new tangent in 2011 which is the increase of diverse political viewpoints between N70 voters. This is made clear through the emerging voices from community members expressing their aspirations for greater democratic values. They alluded to new concerns, at least amongst the younger generation, about which a candidate will be ablest to represent the interest and values of the people. With increased consciousness, these voters raised questions of leadership, particularly the stature of a candidate to represent values by playing prominent roles in civil society and social movements. It goes beyond infrastructure-based vision which appeared to have displaced the prominent position of development promises as the determining factor.

It was in this context that the choice for candidate was reframed leading to a "candidacy drama" for N70. The farce started around the BN's choice of candidate. Weeks prior to the nomination day, various names were "floated" around in search of a winnable candidate. Known as the "mystery candidate", it led to a high level of anticipation among the Lun Bawang and the Kelabit. The intensity of the wait and dilemma resulted in Idris Jala, then a prominent figure with the Prime Minister's department, making a press statement to say that he was not "the mystery" candidate.

Yet in the discourse to persuade voters, Idris Jala's name was widely used. His name was invoked to reframe the choice between Baru Bian and the BN candidate, Willie Liaw. Baru Bian was gaining popularity among younger voters as a civic-oriented leader. Hence, the use of Idris Jala's name, who like Baru Bian, is a widely respected public leader.

Within community powers and norms both men are regarded as good leaders and men of integrity. Considered as committed Christians, they put their faith and values into practice. The younger generation expressed their desire for leaders with deep community ties and personal connections to voters. Both men are highly popular because not only are they highly educated, but have also proven themselves reliable in doing good things for the wider society. Moreover, both have earned the respect of people from all walks of life in their respective fields.

Baru Bian who was a PKR candidate and a Lun Bawang hailed from Long Semadoh, was also the then de facto leader for Sarawak Pakatan Rakyat (PR). A popular human right lawyer especially with regard to the Native Customary Rights (NCR) issues in Sarawak, he successfully challenged the state government and BN leaders over what has been termed by the media as "land grabbing." On the wings of growing mistrust of BN state leaders and PKR's promised major changes in governance, Baru has worked hard to build personal networks with voters. Over the years, his message of protecting native rights grew stronger; therefore, there was wild expectation among Baru Bian's supporters that he would win. For those in Bario and Ba' Kelalan, his message had been affirmed by the activities of the Land and Survey Department, which a few months prior to the election had turned up in the villages to conduct surveys.

Meanwhile, Idris Jala, appointed a senator, a minister in the Prime Minister's Office and the Chief Executive Officer of the Performance Management and Delivery Unit (PEMANDU), was considered by some as the "golden boy." It represented a powerful position, especially significant for the Kelabit who had yet to seek political power. Up to then, no Kelabit had stood for any political election, both at the state and federal elections. Consequently, some considered Idris' appointment as an indication that it was the season for a Kelabit to lead the two communities.

Because of these varied reasons, the choice was reframed to be between Idris Jala, a development architect, or Baru Bian, a spokesperson for native customary rights. Accordingly, a slogan was coined: "A vote for BN is a vote for Idris Jala" [for all he represented]. It was a slogan targeted at the younger voters because they were deemed to prefer political transformation through voting for PKR. There was also a concern that if the Kelabit decided to vote for the opposition, the image of the Kelabit as a small and minority group would be tarnished. However, some contested the pitting of Idris Jala and Baru Bian, arguing that both were equally important albeit their playing different roles in the wider society. An informant noted this by saying "I am not a PKR member but a supporter of Baru Bian. We are not to pit them against each other." This kind of reasoning was prominent amongst Bario voters: many said while their hearts were close to issues championed by

Baru Bian, they were appreciative of Idris's position within the corridor of power. Expressing frustration, a voter said, "using Idris's name and position to beguile us is not fair; it has always been about development. We have enough of development being used to entice us."

The dilemma around candidacy is compounded by kinship relations, which bind contesting candidates to each other. For instance, it is widely known that Willie Liaw and Baru Bian are closely related; in Lun Bawang kinship terminology, the former is a nephew to the latter. From this perspective, an uncle to a nephew implies certain lifetime obligations, and vice versa. Furthermore, both candidates are sons of well-respected pastors who have served among the Lun Bawang in Ba' Kelalan and the Kelabit in Bario. Conversely, their respective supporters are of the same faith and of the same church, Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) albeit of different political parties.

Fragmented Communities and Disrupted Village Life

The statements by P2 and P3 indicate that there was political polarisation leading to the election. P3 for instance considered it to be the tensest and most polarised elections in contemporary Kelabit and Lun Bawang political history with respect to discourse, rhetoric, and the attitude of political leaders towards one another. Voters were divided into two categories: government voters and opposition voters. Understandably, the situation created a political concern, reflected in BN's move to declare Ba' Kelalan as a "black area." Previously seen as peripheral to national politics, the Ba' Kelalan seat drew much national attention. At the height of the election campaigning, the debates over the vision of the future and development issues were quite severe. These debates covered a myriad of issues such as infrastructure and expanding social welfare to questions of rights, privileges, equality and status.

These debates and questions were particularly prevalent among the younger voters who have access to alternative information and have travelled far. As mentioned by a 55-year-old man, many of the young people have travelled far, have seen much of the world and therefore think far into the future. Some suggested the older generation to be more concerned about their appointments as village heads, councilors, etc. These village leaders are seen to be spokespersons for the political elites rather than representing the voice of the people. An informant pointed this out to being *puteng linuh* (shallow thinking).

To a certain level, the polarisation was compounded by tactics of fear and threats which were used unsparingly especially on Baru Bian's supporters. From

observations, many were plagued with the stigma for being in the opposition. They were labeled as anti-government and anti-development. Local leaders at the village level entered into the act too. Although not violent, some young voters were threatened by having their pictures taken when they attended talks by Baru Bian. Reflecting on the quandary, one informant said, "It was very sad for Baru Bian. He has been shunned around here to the point that he had to walk alone along the village path. This was because people were afraid to be seen with him publicly. In some situations, a supporter of an opposition is treated as an outcast. These practices and attitudes are very much against our traditional culture and are not aligned with the values we teach in the churches."

For some, these intimidation tactics did not bear well. To avoid the brunt of the leaders' ire, some have resorted to undercover campaigning and meetings. This is to avoid the scrutiny of the local leadership. In addition, the aggressive campaign tactics, which have been described as Semenanjung style, did not go down well with many of the locals. This is mainly because it involved a "screaming marathon" *ceramah* (public talk) in the multipurpose hall. The breathtaking scale of these campaign tactics generated tensions among the villagers. Some acknowledged that they attended the *ceramah* out of politeness and out of the desire to avert hostility.

Another trend considered by some as distasteful was the use of strong words on pamphlets distributed in the villages in light of local *adet* (custom) in terms of values and practices (see Figure 1). According to some in the villages, the choice of words used in the media were unkind, confrontational and even malicious. This trend was in contradiction to local tastes, considerations and feelings. This backfired: some admitted that the written rhetoric against Baru Bian made them resolve to vote for him and to stand with him as a relative, a fellow Lun Bawang and as a Christian.

The intensity of the situation, according to a 90-year-old man, disrupted their village life. From his perspective, the whole scenario was highly polarised; it left communities fragmented along party lines, and with fractured vision. All of these threatened to affect circles of kinship, religious organisations in the communities, and simultaneously the administrative village as formal organisation. Some others noted that the election stimulated village factional strife, family competition, and coordination of conflicts of interests, which not only cut across into kinship relations but also church membership. This left us with a picture that pointed to the risks and uncertainties in the areas of democracy. As expressed by a 68-year-old pastor, the contentions have threatened to spill over into other areas of village life and other important local institutions such as the local church, which normally would mediate and soften any political disagreement within the communities.

Figure 1: Pamphlets of Baru Bian and Idris Jala.

Election Disruption and Mediation by the Village Church

The impacts of the 2011 election process on the N70 voters have led to fractured vision and fragmented communities, a particularly concerning situation for them as Christian communities. It is widely acknowledged by writers of Kelabit and Lun Bawang life (Deegan 1973; Janowski 1991; Amster, 1998; Saging 1976/1977; Bala 2002; 2008), the great importance of the local church to village life in the highlands. As observed by Deegan (1973, 286) of the Lun Bawang villages: "In many ways, the church was the heart of the community for a community-minded people." For example, nowadays the church organises almost all joint social and economic activities in the villages. These include mobilising informal organisations, which are offshoots of the traditional self-help groups through which villagers provide local mutual assistance; for instance, the organisation of a rotation system to help each other manage their farms (Bala 2008, 180). In short, Christianity plays a significant role in the everyday life of the villagers, including a way to help manage conflict resolutions in the village.

At the outset, the 2011 SSE presented a particular dilemma for the local church in Bario and Ba' Kelalan to remain apolitical or to engage in collective political mobilisation since it affects members of the church. This is an uncomfortable and tricky path to negotiate because the church's mission is not political but religious. Yet some of the electoral issues are closely related to church life – the Bible and the use of certain terms such as Allah by Christians in Malaysia. The church was embroiled in issues pertaining to religious freedom, the impounding of the Bible and debates over religious claims about the exclusivity of certain Malay words in the Bible. This is an ongoing issue which came to light in a 1980's policy changes which banned non-Muslims from using several words considered Islamic.

The debates, and concerns surrounding these issues have led to unprecedented polarisation on all levels of the two communities. As a result, there were important electoral issues in Bario and Ba' Kelalan. In fact, PKR painted BN as anti-Christian (Lee 2011). The scenario threatened the peace among the Christian congregations at the two sites. This was particularly obvious in Ba' Kelalan. It raises the question of how one should conduct oneself in a very divisive political climate. The BN candidate, Willie Liau, announced that he was not going down the road of kneecapping, as he would be focusing on development concerns for the constituency. His comments were well received because of the decorum observed.

Nonetheless, Willie Liau's statement did not abate the tension that was building immediately after the nomination day. In order to mediate the intensity of political competition, Pastor Nelson of Buduk Nur, had to issue a letter of statement. This was to appeal for peace and to avert political disagreement to fragment their unity as Christians:

> May not the differences in opinion destroy the fellowship which we share before God. For me, differences in opinion is a very good thing because it helps us in our own limitation since we choose the party from a narrow perspective. We, therefore, can pray that God who is all knowing will determine for us the person and the party which should govern us. For all your cooperation and the children of the Lord, I give thanks.

In the same vein, the father of the candidate appealed for posters of both candidates to be placed side by side on the church wall. The local churches in the area were asked to pray for God's will to be done in the election. This was to avert further friction in the community. There were other attempts to temper the tensions at least symbolically whereby posters of both candidates are placed side by side on the walls of the longhouses (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Posters of opposing candidate placed side by side on longhouse wall.

The reconciliation effort was extended to a service after the election. The aim was to patch up social fractures. As proliferation of discourses increased, the local church aimed to find common ground by emphasising the importance of their village as a place for community participation, community planning and communal support networks. What this suggests is that while national politics, in this case an election phenomenon, have important bearing on daily life in rural Malaysia, local institutions such as the village churches act to soften political disagreement in a democratic electoral space. This is especially important for communities who are closely knitted but increasingly characterised by a very fragmented vision of their future. This is where non-political organisation plays important roles in stabilising a fractured community and ensures certain principles of democracy are upheld especially during and after elections.

CONCLUSION

This article has set out to understand the local politics and sentiments that motivated political behaviour in the 2011 SSE amongst two ethnic minorities in the Ba' Kelalan (N70) constituency. By using ethnographic evidence and empirical data, we are able to capture the influence of micro level factors on the electoral behaviour of small and rural communities.

Previously seen as peripheral to national politics, in 2011, Ba' Kelalan took on great significance as a potential swing region. One of the most significant outcomes of the election was the fractured BN shield over Ba' Kelalan, and, it became the first PKR seat to be won in rural Sarawak—a pivotal occasion which monumentally shaped the rise of diverse political orientations amongst voters in Ba' Kelalan. The opposition went on to win the 2016 and 2021 SSE.

Underlying this phenomenon are the workings of micro-level factors, such as ethnic background, local histories, local politics, kinship relations, religious beliefs and faith, existence of fractured visions within local communities, characteristics of individual candidates and the nature of their ties to a given ethnic community. They play a crucial role in shaping how election processes serve local interests, which, in turn, influences the outcomes of national elections.

However, as highlighted by this article, the influence of social cultural factors on the electoral behaviour of small communities can only be effectively captured through ethnographic attention. By putting vignettes, narratives and observations made during the election process in context, they clarify shared ideas about what is ideal for the Kelabit and Lun Bawang. This case provides a glimpse of the

interplay of social and cultural elements to point out potential trajectories based on their indigenous experiential understanding of local and national politics.

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