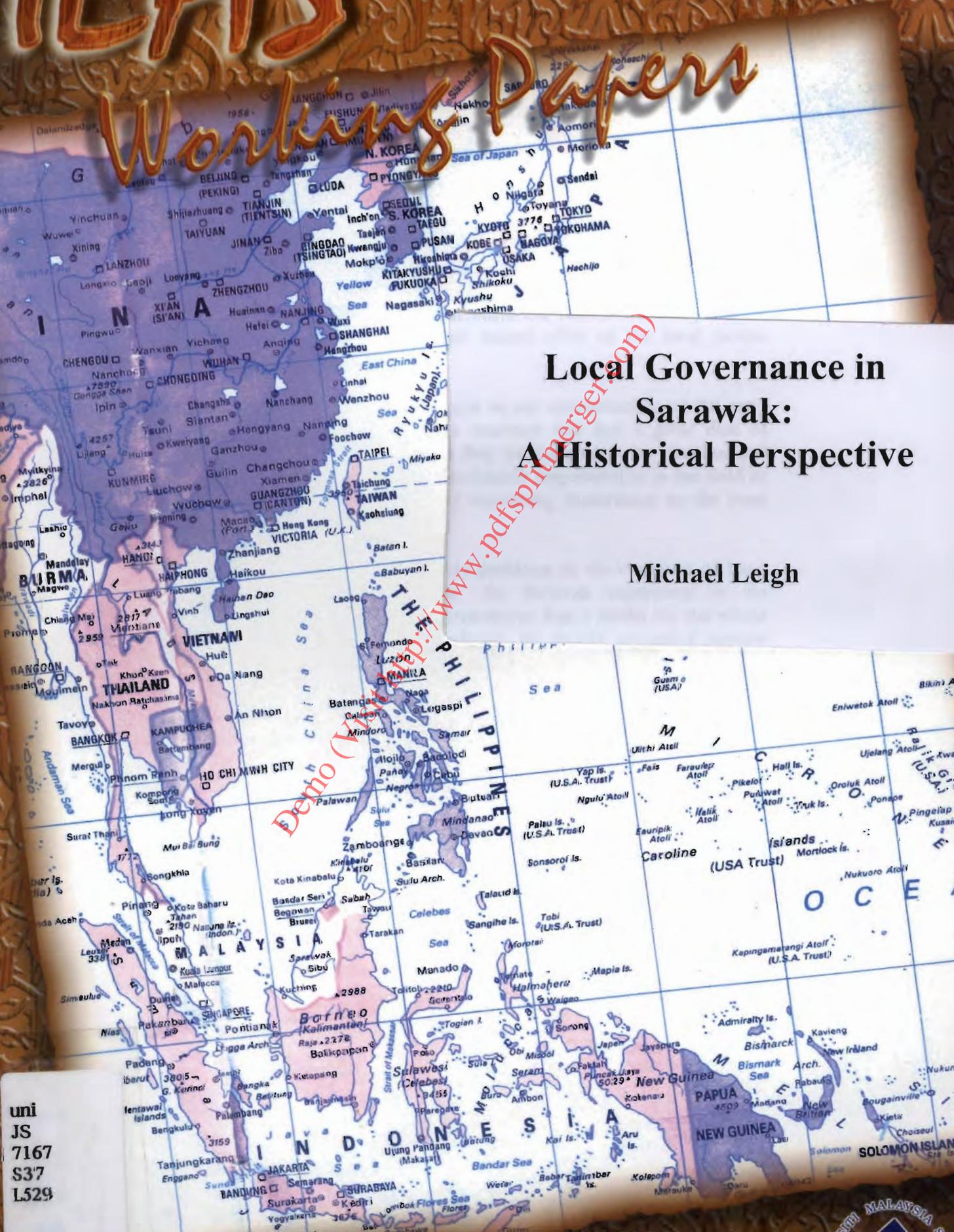


IEAS

Working Papers



Local Governance in Sarawak: A Historical Perspective

Michael Leigh

Demo (www.pdfsplitmerger.com)

uni
JS
7167
S37
L529



LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN SARAWAK: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Professor Dr. Michael B. Leigh
Director, Institute of East Asian Studies
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

The first 50 years of local government in Sarawak was a period of steadily growing local participation in decision-making, participation that transcended racial boundaries. Wherever the elective principle was extended on a multi-racial basis the results were beyond the anticipation of government, and indeed often of the local people themselves.

This paper seeks to fill some gaps in our understanding of the early growth of local government, a structure that had a great deal of significance for local people as they participated in its elections and also as councils were given considerable responsibility in the field of primary education, a sphere of increasing importance to the rural people.

Whereas there were considerable problems in the workings of local authorities in West Malaysia,¹ the Sarawak experience in the development of elected local government was a model for the whole nation, and a meaningful foundation for solidly grounded popular participation in local governance.

The second part of this paper is a discussion of the relationship between councils and the pre-existing "Headman and Chief" structure. It concludes with the view that a decade of elections at the local level had rendered the status of Chinese Kapitan or Headman almost irrelevant, and a similar process was underway for the offices of Penghulu/O.K.P. and Tua Kampung. Popular elections at the local level had steadily undercut the pre-eminent status of government-appointed Headmen. Had such elections been continued there is every reason to believe that popularly elected councilors would have eclipsed the Headmen for all but simple administrative and essentially ceremonial purposes

¹ For a detailed discussion see: Malaysia. *Report of the Royal Commission of Enquiry to investigate into the workings of local authorities in West Malaysia*, under the Chairmanship of Senator Dato' Athi Nahappan. KL, Government Printer, 1970, 347pp. This is commonly known as the Nahappan Report, and recommended a continuation of elective local government on the Peninsula. However, the Federal Government commissioned a subsequent departmental report on which it is justified the decision to abandon all elections for local authorities. Perhaps there was a fear that opposition parties might establish themselves in positions of local power and influence through electoral successes.