

THE 2021 SARAWAK STATE ELECTION: THE RISE OF GABUNGAN PARTI SARAWAK AND PROSPECTS FOR SARAWAK POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the results of the 2021 Sarawak State Election (SSE21) and explains Gabungan Parti Sarawak's (GPS) major victory. Analysts had predicted an unassailable success for GPS but stopped short of giving the coalition more than 70 seats (out of the 82 seats contested). This was due to restricted candidates' movements caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, political uncertainties at the federal level and the challenges posed by newcomers such as Parti Sarawak Bersatu (PSB) and Parti Bumi Kenyalang (PBK). However, the results indicated otherwise: GPS did the unthinkable, winning more than 90% of the seats in the Sarawak State Legislative Assembly, including recapturing some of the traditional seats held by the opposition. Moreover, it turned out that the COVID-19 standard operating procedures (SOPs) were advantageous to GPS and disadvantageous to the opposition. The article also explores a host of other factors contributing to GPS's rise such as the coalition's incumbency advantage, low voting turnout and the unhappiness towards the opposition among some segments of voters. GPS's sweeping win has cemented its position in local politics and has given it more leverage as a kingmaker at the federal level. Even though the future looks promising for GPS, the prevailing political conditions at the federal level and the changing mood of the electorates will set to test the coalition's dominance in Sarawak.

Keywords: 2021 Sarawak State Election, GPS, Sarawak politics, COVID-19, incumbency

INTRODUCTION

The Sarawak State Legislative Assembly (SLA) was due to dissolve automatically on 7 June 2021 following the expiry of its term but the state election was suspended due to the nationwide emergency, which ended on 1 August 2021 and the subsequent emergency in Sarawak from 2 August 2021 to 2 February 2022. The emergency was then lifted on 3 November 2021, paving the way for the polls to be held. A total of 1,252,014 voters were eligible to vote in the election with early voting on 14 December 2021. There were 82 seats in the SLA with 42 needed to form a simple majority.

Many analysts predicted that Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) could win the election based on a two-thirds majority which was more than 54 seats (Puyok 2021a, 11). However, based on the analysis of 28 seats considered as “competitive”, the number of seats which GPS could garner would not be more than 64 seats (*ibid.*). These competitive seats were those won by GPS in 2016 but with reduced majorities. It was also suggested that that newcomer Parti Sarawak Bersatu (PSB) would be the game-changer that could provide a strong challenge to GPS. If election posters and banners were anything to go by, it was obvious that the battle was between GPS and PSB. So, what were at stakes in this election? Why was it important particularly to current chief minister Abang Johari Openg (or Abang Jo as he is popularly known) and GPS?

Without doubt, this was GPS’s first electoral outing after its formation in 2018 under Abang Jo’s leadership. The election was important for him as he needed the people’s mandate to govern Sarawak for another five years. A big win was also crucial for GPS to give it a stronger political leverage as a kingmaker in Malaysia’s troubled political environment.

In the 2016 Sarawak State Election (SSE16), under the late Adenan Satem (or Tok Nan as he is affectionately known), the then Sarawak Barisan Nasional (BN) secured a huge victory, winning 72 out of 82 seats contested. The “Tok Nan factor” was decisive in returning BN to power (Weiss and Puyok 2017). In the 2021 Sarawak State Election (SSE21), questions had been raised about whether Abang Jo could repeat Tok Nan’s electoral feat especially when the country was reeling from an economic shock due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the political uncertainties at the federal level. Even though there was pessimism about GPS’s electoral debut, the ruling coalition held the edge over its opponents as it entered the electoral fray, banking on its track record in developing the state’s economy and success in the vaccination roll out. Vaccination rates in Sarawak were relatively high with the