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Post-Sarawak Elections: The Sway of Chinese Voters

By Choong Pui Yee and Farish Noor

Synopsis

Malaysia's ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional, won two-thirds of seats contested in the recently held Sarawak state elections but suffered an erosion of Chinese voter support. Such a trend will only deepen communal politics in the country.

Commentary

MALAYSIA'S RULING Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition won two-thirds of the seats in the 16 April 2011 state elections in Sarawak. Supported by the presence of Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, the BN victory means it retained its majority in the East Malaysian state with 55 seats and was able to form the state government again. Despite the victory in this staunchly pro-BN state, which has always been perceived as the BN's 'fixed deposit', the ruling coalition has suffered a significant drop in ethnic Chinese voter support.

The opposition parties acting in alliance as Pakatan Rakyat (PR) made inroads, eating into the BN's support base. The Democratic Action Party (DAP) won 12 out of the 15 seats it contested, doubling its share of seats in Sarawak since the 2006 state elections. Another opposition party, the People's Justice Party (PKR) won three seats, including a rural seat at Ba'Kelalan, while the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) did not win a single seat. The inroads made by the opposition alliance were mainly due to the work of the DAP. One unexpected result was the toppling of George Chan, the state's deputy chief minister from the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP). His defeat by a political newcomer, Ling Sie Kiong, strongly manifests the intensity of Chinese voter sentiment against the BN.

Building up the Momentum

Prior to polling day, campaigning from both the BN and PR were equally heated, drawing large crowds. Apart from the traditional speeches by political leaders, local Chinese singers were roped in from BN to attract the Chinese voter crowd. Complimentary 1Malaysia T-shirts and goodie bags were given to those who attended the BN campaigns.

The opposition DAP created a hornbill mascot named 'Ubah' (Change) to align with their campaign tagline, 'Vote for Change' against the BN's 'Vote for Transformation'. Criticising Sarawak Chief Minister Taib Mahmud's record of government and the recent impounding of Malay-language Bibles were among the tactics used as the opposition worked up the sentiments of the locals especially in the urban areas. As Christians make up almost half the population of Sarawak, harping on religious issues such as the Malay Bibles and the 'Allah'

controversy painted the BN government as neglecting Christian minority concerns. The crowds that cheered the opposition at their rallies gave the impression of unprecedented support by Sarawak standards.

Results and Implications

While the opposition parties, notably the DAP, did manage to attract large crowds, the fact remains that the BN still managed to retain its two-thirds majority to form the government. The BN's share of the popular vote, however, dropped from 62 to 55 percent.

The results of the Sarawak state elections highlighted the shift of Chinese votes to the DAP, paving the way for the party to have a stronger voice in Sarawak. Even though the opposition coalition is lagging behind in terms of funding, machinery and political veterans in Sarawak, they won the support of the Chinese electorate. Compounding the changing political climate is the sway of the Dayak voters towards the opposition. This is also unprecedented. Thus, Sarawak can no longer be seen as the electoral 'fixed deposit' of the BN that can ensure unchallenged support.

The Sarawak state electoral result illustrates the disenchantment of the ethnic Chinese community with the incumbent government. Many opposition supporters had traveled to Sarawak from Peninsular Malaysia to assist the campaigns and extend donations. The fact that a major share of the Sarawak Chinese votes had gone to the opposition suggests that Chinese political sentiment in Sarawak is largely hostile to the BN – as in Peninsular Malaysia.

Soon after the elections, DAP veteran leader Lim Kit Siang offered a merger with the Sarawak National Party (SNAP). The proposal is designed to penetrate the Malay-Melanau and Dayak-Iban seats in Sarawak. This is indeed a strategic move if it succeeds. It may even pave the way for DAP to penetrate the rural seats, leading to stronger competition with the BN in the next general election.

Greater Polarisation

One consequent of the recent elections is the hardening of ethnic differences and growing racial polarisation. The Malaysian Chinese community will be seen and labeled as pro-opposition, consciously or subconsciously, by the BN. Soon after the state elections, the weekend edition of Utusan Malaysia, an UMNO mouthpiece, bluntly called on the Sarawak government to ignore the Chinese community and limit its representation in the state cabinet. Certainly, such a call will not be welcomed by the Malaysian Chinese community and one can only foresee deeper communal politics across both West and East Malaysia.

Yet at the same time, the DAP has yet to transcend its own image as a Chinese-led and dominated party lacking support from Malaysian Malay and Indian voters. This is the Achilles' heel of the DAP. This weakness will continue to be exploited by its political opponents to paint it as a party that is based on Chinese chauvinism. There will thus be no end to the active exploitation of racial polemics and polarisation. Such communal politics is thus not likely to change in the near future.

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