

PATRONAGE, POWER AND PROWESS: BARISAN NASIONAL'S EQUILIBRIUM DOMINANCE IN EAST MALAYSIA

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Despite making significant inroads in Sabah and Sarawak during the 2013 elections, the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) party, with nine parliamentary seats, failed to weaken the Barisan Nasional (BN) party's control of these two East Malaysian states. The 47 seats won by the BN in Sabah and Sarawak accounted for 35% of the total number of seats (133) that it won nationally, indicating the importance of these East Malaysian states to the BN. Utilising a resource theory of single-party dominance, this chapter argues that the BN's electoral success in Sabah and Sarawak is dependent on the incumbent's use of patronage resources that are augmented by Prime Minister Najib Razak's seemingly limitless financial support. Equally important in explaining the BN's equilibrium dominance in East Malaysia is the role played by the Malay-Muslim bumiputera, who have emerged as the backbone of the ruling party. Fearing the loss of state power, the Malay-Muslim bumiputera consolidated behind the ruling party. The strong urban presence of the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) further alienated Malay-Muslim bumiputera support for the PR. This chapter also explores the prowess of the BN's political machinery in gaining influence among the rural electorate scattered across the vast and rugged terrain of Borneo. Having made immense efforts to penetrate rural Sabah and Sarawak, the BN has established a strong presence there at the grassroots level that the opposition has yet to challenge. This chapter argues that unless the opposition can offer persuasive counter-narratives and party-building initiatives, the BN will continue to dominate politics in East Malaysia, ensuring its equilibrium dominance at the federal level.

Keywords: Sabah and Sarawak politics, dominance, electoral politics

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the hotly contested 2013 elections, Prime Minister Najib Razak and opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim made numerous visits to Sabah and Sarawak in a determined effort to persuade the East Malaysian voters. Najib's visits to urban or rural constituencies in Malaysian Borneo were immediately followed by visits

from Anwar, and vice versa. The intensity of the campaigns in Sabah and Sarawak were unprecedented; both states were poised to determine federal power because the Peninsula electorate was evenly split.

For several decades, the Barisan Nasional's (BN) equilibrium dominance—the long-term continuous rule of a single party with existing but ineffective challenger parties (Greene, 2007: 71)—in Sabah and Sarawak had not been seriously contested. However, numerous issues that emerged prior to the 2013 elections threatened the BN's position. Many analysts and seasoned politicians expected the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) party to significantly increase its presence in East Malaysia to fulfil its aim of capturing federal power (Ding, 2013; *The Malaysian Insider*, 2013a; Chong, 2013). However, when the election results were released on 6th May, they revealed that Sabah and Sarawak remained BN strongholds, despite the opposition's success in increasing its seat tallies from two in 2008 to nine in 2013. Consequently, the BN retained federal power despite faring worse than it had in the 2008 election. Why did the opposition fail to destroy the BN's equilibrium dominance despite the perceived potential for change in the two states? Why did the majority of voters in Sabah and Sarawak, particularly the rural bumiputera, continue to support the BN despite their numerous criticisms of the ruling party and the host of issues plaguing the two states? This chapter argues that the much-anticipated political change-over in East Malaysia did not occur because of the continuing influence of political patronage, Muslim bumiputera support of Malay Muslim political dominance via BN rule and the prowess of the ruling party's political machinery in persuading rural voters. Unless the PR is able provide persuasive counter-narratives, strengthen its party machinery and demand more democratic space, the BN will continue to dominate politics in Sabah and Sarawak, ensuring its equilibrium dominance at the federal level.

CONTESTED DOMINANCE: THE 2013 SABAH AND SARAWAK ELECTIONS

The pre-election issues in Sabah and Sarawak seriously threatened the BN's equilibrium dominance in the two East Malaysian states. In Sabah, the BN's dominance began to seem tenuous when maverick KadazanDusun opposition leader, Dr. Jeffrey Kitingan, launched a massive "Borneo Agenda" campaign in late 2011 to lure non-Muslim bumiputera away from the United Malay National Organization (UMNO)-led government. His Sarawak-based State Reform Party (STAR) claimed to have organised thousands of "Borneo Tea Parties" across the KadazanDusun-Murut (KDM) heartland. The STAR blamed the national ruling party for the erosion of state power and the marginalisation of the KDM. (STAR was founded by former Sarawak Minister Dr. Patau Rubis in 1996. Jeffrey brought STAR to Sabah in 2012 as a vehicle to contest the 2013 elections after

his efforts to register a new party failed). Jeffrey and STAR Sabah coined the phrase "Ini Kalilah" (Change Now), the rallying call for change that became popular among not only Sabahans but also other opposition supporters throughout the country. It was anticipated that the "Borneo Agenda" campaign would pose a serious threat to the BN's dominance of all six KDM parliamentary seats. Sabah BN experienced another setback when two of its lawmakers, Lajim Ukin (UMNO – Beaufort) and Wilfred Bumburing (United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO) – Tuaran), left their respective parties and joined the opposition in the middle of 2011. Both leaders were popular with their constituencies, and their departure weakened the BN's influence in the Muslim bumiputera seat of Beaufort and the mixed seat of Tuaran. In fact, Lajim's defection was expected to stir anti-BN sentiment among the Muslim bumiputera of Sabah, who had a significant parliamentary presence (15 seats; see Table 1). In February 2013, Sabah was rocked by a more serious pre-election issue that could potentially destabilise the BN, especially with regard to its Muslim bumiputera seats. The invasion of Lahad Datu by armed Sulu men was initially thought to have had a negative impact on the opposition due to the sense of nationalism that was expected to arise from the perceived threat to national security. However, the reaction was manifestly the opposite. Many Sabahans grew angry at the slow response of Malaysian forces to an event that had created a sense of fear and vulnerability among the inhabitants of the east coast of Sabah, who were primarily Muslim bumiputera. These three major pre-election issues had the potential to challenge BN's electoral dominance beyond the loss of two Chinese majority seats that were already expected to go to the opposition. Based on these pre-election developments, the opposition was confident that it would gain between four and eleven parliamentary seats, which would significantly contribute to the PR's goal of capturing federal power.

In Sarawak, the opposition had made significant progress, winning 16 of 71 seats in the 2011 state election (Sarawak is the only state in Malaysia that holds its state and parliamentary elections separately). It was therefore expected to carry this momentum of change into the 2013 elections. The challenge of the opposition was to move beyond Chinese majority seats; 11 of the seats that it had won in 2011 were Chinese majority seats. As in Sabah, most of the parliamentary seats in Sarawak represent rural areas with predominantly bumiputera voters (see Table 1). Therefore, the opposition needed to gain control of these seats to significantly contribute to the PR's goal of capturing federal power. Several months before the 2013 elections, the opposition was significantly strengthened when Global Witness released an incriminating video that depicted Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud's family members and business associates abusing logging licenses to enrich themselves. The opposition was quick to exploit the Global Witness video by distributing thousands of VCD copies to rural marginal seats, especially those that had been affected by the land grab. This strategy was expected to tip nine marginal seats, in addition to the six Chinese majority seats,

to the opposition. Even Taib acknowledged the potential threat of the opposition in the 2013 elections when he publicly stated that the BN could win at least 23 seats, implying that eight seats were under threat. In the aftermath of the Global Witness video and the revolt of the Chinese voters, the opposition was expected to gain control of between 6 and 15 seats, a significant number for the opposition in a state known to be a BN stronghold.

Table 1: Parliamentary seats in Sabah and Sarawak based on voters' ethnicity, 2013

	Sabah	Sarawak
Muslim bumiputera seats	15	8
Non-Muslim bumiputera seats	6	13
Chinese seats	2	6
Mixed seats	2	4
Total	25	31

Source: Berita Harian (2008; 2013).

The 2013 election in Sabah and Sarawak was well attended, with a dozen parties and a record number of candidates (95 and 82 for Sabah and Sarawak, respectively). In Sabah, the BN was led by the UMNO, which contested 14 parliamentary seats, followed by Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) with 5, UPKO with 4, and the Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS) and Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) with 1 seat each (see Table 2). In the 2013 election, the UMNO and PBS secured one additional seat each after the departure of the Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) from the ruling coalition following the 2008 elections. The opposition, however, was fragmented into three groups after it failed to forge a united coalition due to disagreements over seat allocation. Another reason for the schism among the opposition parties was a mistrust of STAR, which had allegedly been funded by UMNO Sabah in an effort to split the opposition vote. In 2008, only the PKR and DAP fielded candidates. In the 2013 election, however, other opposition parties, including STAR, PAS and Parti Kesejahteraan Insan Tanah Air (KITA), made their parliamentary debuts. The national opposition PR coalition (Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) – 19 candidates, DAP – 4 candidates, Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) – 2 candidates) and the local opposition front known as the United Borneo Front (UBF) (STAR – 21, SAPP – 8) contested all 25 parliamentary seats. Joining the fray were a lone KITA candidate and 15 independents (see Table 2). Consequently, there were multi-corner contests (3 to 7 candidates) for all of the parliamentary seats except for Sandakan, thus throwing doubt on the opposition's ability to prevent BN dominance.

Table 2: Number of seats won and contested in Sabah and Sarawak, 2008 and 2013

Parties	Sabah				Sarawak			
	2008		2013		2008		2013	
	Seats won	Seats contested	Seats won	Seats contested	Seats won	Seats contested	Seats won	Seats contested
BN								
UMNO	13	13	14	14	–	–	–	–
UPKO	4	4	3	4	–	–	–	–
PBS	3	4	4	5	–	–	–	–
PBRIS	1	1	1	1	–	–	–	–
LDP	1	1	0	1	–	–	–	–
PBB	–	–	–	–	14	14	14	14
SUPP	–	–	–	–	6	7	1	7
PRS	–	–	–	–	6	6	6	6
SPDP	–	–	–	–	4	4	4	4
PKR	0	21		19	0	12	1	15
DAP	1	5	2	4	1	7	5	11
PAS	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	5
STAR	0	0	0	21	0	0	0	7
SAPP*	2	2	0	8	–	–	–	–
SWP	–	–	–	–	0	0	0	6
KITA	0	0	0	1	–	–	–	–
SNAP	–	–	–	–	0	3	0	0
BERSEKUTU	0	2	0	0	–	–	–	–
IND	0	18	0	15	0	12	0	7
Total	25	71	25	95	31	66	31	82

Note: * SAPP was part of BN in 2008 but it withdrew from the coalition a few months later.

Source: Election Commission Malaysia (2009; 2013).

Sarawak's election was also crowded, though fewer parties and candidates participated than in Sabah. A Muslim bumiputera-dominated party, the Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), led the dominant coalition by contesting 14 parliamentary seats, whereas the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) fielded 7 candidates, the Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS) 6 and the Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) 4 (see Table 2), mirroring the 2008 seat allocation. The Sarawak opposition was also fragmented along regional lines between the national opposition PR coalition (PKR – 15 candidates, DAP – 11, PAS – 5) and the local UBF (STAR – 7) (see Table 2). Having registered barely a month before the election, another local party, the Sarawak Workers Party (SWP),

made its electoral debut by fielding six candidates. It did not join any opposition coalitions because it had publicly declared itself to be a BN-friendly opposition party. Helmed primarily by former PRS leaders, the SWP nominated candidates for all six PRS seats while avoiding other BN component parties. Seven Independent candidates also ran, resulting in three to four corner contests for 17 seats throughout the state. This seemed to weaken the opposition's chance of capturing more than just the Chinese urban seats.

When the election results were finally released, the tectonic shift that was expected to occur had not taken place. The opposition had significantly increased its seat tally from two in 2008 to nine in 2013, but this was far short of its target. All except for one of the seats won by the opposition in Sabah and Sarawak were urban Chinese seats. In fact, all of the Chinese seats in Sabah (Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan) and Sarawak (Bandar Kuching, Stampin, Sarikei, Lanang, Sibul, Miri) went to the opposition. The BN successfully defended its "fixed deposit" states by retaining control of all of the bumiputera seats except for Penampang in Sabah. Nonetheless, the opposition significantly increased its popular vote from 30.9% in 2008 to 36.6% in 2013. In fact, the Borneo opposition fared better than their counterparts in the Peninsula with respect to the increase in popular vote. In Sabah and Sarawak, opposition support climbed 5.7 percentage points; in the Peninsula the increase was merely 3.4 percentage points (see Table 3).

Within the opposition, national parties, particularly the PKR and DAP, proved to be more appealing, as evidenced by their commendable performance in the 2013 elections. In Sabah, the PKR garnered 25.3% of votes and STAR a mere 5.6%, though the latter contested two more seats than the former (see Table 4). In fact, the DAP Sabah secured more votes (8.3%) than the STAR despite contesting just four seats, whereas the UBF fielded candidates for 21 seats. The popularity of the PR allowed rising PKR leader Darell Leiking to capture the hotly contested seat of Penampang, which led to the fall of prominent KDM leader Bernard Dompok of the UPKO. A combination of factors, such as the strong appeal of the PKR candidate, the criticisms voiced against the BN's KDM leaders (especially Dompok for not doing enough for the community), the intensity of the PKR campaign, and a clever manipulation of national and local issues, contributed to the PKR's victory. Two additional opposition seats were won by the DAP, which had successfully defended its Kota Kinabalu seat while recapturing the other Chinese majority seat of Sandakan. The Chinese revolt in Sabah had already begun in 2008 and persisted into 2013. In fact, the opposition could have won Sandakan in 2008; the DAP and Independent candidates collectively received more votes than the BN candidate. A comprehensive rejection by the Chinese voters in 2013 was motivated by their frustration with the Muslim bumiputera-led government, which had marginalised the Chinese community. This problem was exacerbated by the lingering "Sabah issues" and other national issues, such as corruption, rising crime levels, the high cost of living and the lack of support for vernacular education. Clearly, the UBF's "Borneo Agenda" failed to attract

enough votes to capture even a single parliamentary seat. However, this does not mean that the electorate completely rejected the Borneo discourse; the PR also exploited the issue of state autonomy and rights, though using a less extreme approach than the UBF. Jeffrey promoted a total rejection of federalism that allegedly became the root of the "Sabah issues": the citizenship-for-votes programme, alarming poverty rates, loss of state autonomy and the marginalisation of the state. The UBF's vision for Sabah differed markedly from that of the PR, espousing state autonomy within the framework of federal democracy. The Lahad Datu incident accentuated the role of the federal government in providing protection and security for Sabah, thus undermining the UBF's autonomous Sabah agenda. Furthermore, many opposition supporters were sceptical of STAR Sabah and especially of Jeffrey, who had been accused of colluding with the BN to split opposition votes. This image dissuaded opposition supporters from voting for UBF parties.

Table 3: Number of parliamentary seats and percentage of popular vote won in 2008 and 2013

Region	2008				2013			
	BN		PR		BN		PR	
	Number of seats won	% of Popular vote gained	Number of seats won	% of Popular vote gained	Number of seats won	% of Popular vote gained	Number of seats won	% of Popular vote gained
Peninsular Malaysia	85	49.7	80	49.9	85	45.8	80	53.3
Sabah and Sarawak	54	62.7	2	30.9	48	57.0	9	36.6
Total	140	51.4	82	47.5	133	47.4	89	50.9

Source: Election Commission Malaysia (2009: 151–199; 2013).

In Sarawak, the DAP received the most votes among the opposition with 22%, followed by the PKR with 12.9%. Even the least popular PR component party, the PAS, fared better than STAR Sarawak, obtaining 2.1% more votes despite contesting two fewer seats than the latter (see Table 4). After making history by capturing 10 seats in the 2011 state election, the DAP continued its winning streak by nearly sweeping the Chinese majority seats in the 2013 elections. Having expanded to Sarawak in 1978, the DAP successfully defended Bandar Kuching and Sibu (won in the 2010 by-election) while gaining Stampin, Sarikei and Lanang from the SUPP. The last remaining Chinese seat, Miri, went to the PKR. At the core of the Chinese resentment against the BN was Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud's illegal prolongation of his term and abuse of his powers. Additional national and local issues caused many Chinese voters to

abandon the BN, including corruption, lack of democracy and transparency, the rising cost of living, high crime rates, lack of religious freedom and lack of support for vernacular education. However, the change of loyalties among the Chinese voters was motivated by more than anti-BN sentiments. A large majority of the Chinese, especially the young voters, were attracted to the DAP's youthful ethos, which was created by its young professional candidates, strong campaign message and "*Ubah*" (change) slogan and vocal approach to emphasising the interests of the people. In other words, the DAP was able to convince Chinese voters that they could be the voice of the community, especially as the SUPP became increasingly subservient to the PBB. As noted earlier, STAR Sarawak performed much worse than the PR in the election, but this was expected because the party had been dormant for several elections. Another Sarawak-based opposition party, the SWP, also failed to win any seats despite having strong financial backing from former BN assemblyman cum wealthy businessman Sng Chee Hua.

Although the BN succeeded in maintaining its electoral dominance in Sabah and Sarawak, its popularity declined significantly in 2013. In Sabah, the BN's popularity declined by 6.4%; in Sarawak, the drop was 5.3%, both higher than the decrease of the BN's popular vote in the Peninsula. UMNO Sabah consolidated its position by winning all of the 14 seats that it had contested, and the PBS, LDP and UPKO lost one seat each. In Sarawak, the PBB not only succeeded in defending all 14 of its contested seats but also emerged as the second-largest party within the national BN after the spectacular fall of the traditional power brokers within the ruling coalition, i.e., the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and the Parti Gerakan Malaysia (Gerakan). Even the other smaller Sabah and Sarawak parties, including the PRS, SPDP, PBS and UPKO, fared better than these three senior BN coalition parties. With the contribution of UMNO Sabah, the national Malay party increased its parliamentary presence to 88 seats, 9 more seats than in 2008. The remaining Peninsula-based BN parties suffered significant losses in 2013. The MCA had the most casualties, with only 7 wins (of 37 seats), followed by Gerakan (which won 1 of 11 seats contested) and the MIC (which won 4 of the 9 seats contested). With the strong showings of BN Sabah and BN Sarawak in the 2013 elections, the balance of power within the ruling coalition shifted dramatically, and the East Malaysian parties emerged as the new senior partners.

Table 4: Percentage of popular votes in Sabah and Sarawak, 2008 and 2013

Parties	Sabah		Sarawak	
	2008 (%)	2013 (%)	2008 (%)	2013 (%)
BN	61.2	54.8	64.2	58.9
PKR	26.7	25.3	8.4	12.9
DAP	6.2	8.3	20.2	22.0
PAS	–	2.4	0.6	2.4
STAR	–	5.6	–	0.3
SAPP	–	1.3	–	–
SWP	–	–	–	1.9
KITA	–	0.1	–	–
SNAP	–	–	1.6	–
BERSEKUTU	0.2	–	–	–
IND	5.8	2.3	5.1	1.7

Source: Election Commission Malaysia (2009: 151–199; 2013).

DOMINANT PARTY ADVANTAGES: PATRONAGE, POWER AND PROWESS

Mexico once had a dominant party system similar to Malaysia's. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) of Mexico won every presidential election from 1929 to 2000, held the majority in Congress until 1997, won every governorship until 1989 and controlled the vast majority of Mexican municipalities (Greene, 2007: 1). Despite its equilibrium dominance, the PRI eventually lost its majority in Congress in 1997 to the National Action Party (PAN) and the Party of Democratic Revolution (PRD). Three years later, Vicente Fox of the PAN won the presidency, putting the final nail in the PRI's coffin. Greene (2007) argues that dominant parties like the PRI can retain power due to incumbency advantages, i.e., resource advantages and the ability to raise the costs of electoral participation. As a result, only ideologically oriented politicians and activists create opposition parties, which make specialised or niche appeals to a minority electorate. Because their platforms do not align with the preferences of the average voter, they remain too small to defeat the dominant parties. Only when the incumbent's advantages diminish can the opposition parties attract more moderate voters as they transform from niche parties into electorally competitive catchall parties (Greene, 2007: 6). Greene's (2007) theory of single-party dominance argues that incumbents survive by transforming public resources into partisan goods that are primarily used to achieve political obedience among the masses and political and business elites. In addition, incumbents also exploit their access to public

resources to thwart any potential challenges from the opposition. This would include enacting repressive laws, resorting to electoral fraud, stoking fear and detaining political opponents. Greene (2007) argues that as long as dominant parties have these incumbent advantages, the opposition will be forced to become niche parties, limiting their chances of making significant inroads during elections.

Table 5: Breakdown of seats won and contested in the 2008 and 2013 elections

Parties	2008		2013	
	Seats won	Seats contested	Seats won	Seats contested
Barisan Nasional	140	222	133	221
UMNO	78	117	88	121
MCA	15	40	7	37
MIC	3	9	4	9
Gerakan	2	12	1	11
PBB	14	14	14	14
SUPP	6	7	1	7
SPDP	4	4	4	4
PRS	6	6	6	6
UPKO	4	4	3	4
PBS	3	4	4	5
SAPP	2	2	–	–
PBRIS	1	1	1	1
LDP	1	1	0	1
PPP	0	1	0	1
Pakatan Rakyat	82*	211	89	223
PKR	31	97	30	99
PAS	23	67	21	73
DAP	28	47	38	51
Other	0	45	0	135

* Pakatan Rakyat was formed after the 2008 elections.

Source: Election Commission Malaysia (2009: 151–199; 2013).

In the 2013 elections, the BN maintained its equilibrium dominance in Sabah and Sarawak despite losing more seats and the popular vote. The dominant party achieved victory by continuously exploiting its access to the resources binding the electorate firmly to the party. At the heart of the BN's incumbency advantages is the practice of political patronage. Patronage refers to the ways in which politicians distribute public employment or special favours in exchange for

electoral support (Weingrod, 1968: 379). It is a political tool in which incumbent party leaders seek to tender public institutions, resources and various types of favours in exchange for votes.

Patronage has long been a defining feature of Sabah and Sarawak society, which have lived under a patron-client system since the days of the Bruneian Empire and the Sulu Sultanate (Black, 1968; Lim, 2008; Sanib, 1985; Faisal, 2012). During this period, local chiefs with the title Datu were accorded power by the Sultanates to administer their polities and the inhabitants. However, when European colonialists arrived in Sabah and Sarawak, they tactically removed the power of these chiefs to consolidate their position (Faisal, 2012). With the weakening of local chiefs and the eventual departure of the European colonialists, the modern states of Sabah and Sarawak assumed the role of patron and continued to exercise control over their multi-racial and multi-religious societies. In exchange for protection and support, the new state demanded political obedience from the elites and the masses. Initially, the rich resources of the state, especially logging licenses, became the source of patronage used by the politicians of Sabah and Sarawak to establish networks of clients among political and business elites and the electorate. However, as the states' rich resources began to be depleted, politicians were forced to depend on infrastructure projects and other public resources to sustain the support and loyalty of their clients.

One of the earliest works on patronage politics in post-independence East Malaysia is Margaret Clark Roff's (1974) *The Politics of Belonging: Political Change in Sabah and Sarawak*. She contends that the Alliance (later Barisan Nasional) won votes through "the granting of goods and favours (particularly to those such as village headmen who were presumed to be able to deliver blocs of votes), and by appealing to primordial loyalties of ethnic, linguistic and religious kinds" (Roff, 1974: 166). As the incumbent political party in Sabah and Sarawak, the Alliance exploited its access to resources, particularly logging licenses, cabinet posts, infrastructure projects, public sector employment and monetary rewards, to form coalitions among political elites and to secure electoral support among the masses. Despite Roff's (1974) assertion that this practice was gradually phased out during the process of modernisation, the opposite is true. Political patronage persists and has become deeply entrenched in Sabah and Sarawak, especially in the bumiputera community.

In post-independence Sabah, the practice of patronage peaked during the rule of Harris Salleh of the Parti Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah (BERJAYA) (Lim, 2008: 81). During his tenure (1976–1985) as the sixth Sabah Chief Minister, Harris made explicit the link between support for BERJAYA and the benefits of development (Lim, 2008: 81). Harris punished opposition supporters by withholding development projects from them and, in extreme cases, revoking the district status of areas that voted for the opposition. Notably, Harris was able to bring a significant level of development to Sabah, though the practice of patronage tainted his administration with accusations of abuse, corruption and

nepotism. When he took office in 1976, Sabah was underdeveloped and had a high poverty rate. He was able to transform the state and made development a rare political commodity. As a result, Harris was able to control the electorate, especially those who were in need of development. Harris' successors continued to employ political patronage as a key strategy in ensuring equilibrium dominance in Sabah.

In Sarawak, the Third Chief Minister Abdul Rahman Yaakub popularised political patronage as a tool of control, but his successor, Abdul Taib Mahmud, was instrumental in perfecting it as a "craft" (Faisal, 2012). Both Muslim Melanau leaders influenced the electorate by distributing development projects, financial assistance, land titles and other minor handouts (i.e., fishing nets, fertiliser and water tanks), especially during election years. Despite criticisms of their approach, Rahman and Taib were able to bring growth to the state and persuade many Sarawakians to believe that only the BN could bring development to the people. As a result, Sarawakians, especially those in rural areas, ceased to differentiate between BN as a party and the government as a public institution. The Sarawak Malays even called the BN "perintah" (government), indicating the community's strong attachment to the ruling party. It would be unthinkable to vote against "perintah" because one would lose all of the benefits that the government provided. The BN reaffirmed this mentality by depriving opposition supporters of development projects, which is the same strategy used by Harris and other Sabah leaders. It should also be noted that the blending of the government and the ruling party is not unique to Sarawak and that many rural voters in Sabah and the Peninsula also exhibit this mentality, thus contributing to the BN's continued dominance.

In anticipation of the 2013 elections, the Najib-led government amplified the BN's patronage by promising RM13.5 billion worth of development projects for Sabah (*New Straits Times*, 2013). This promise had been partially fulfilled by the deployment of 3,193 projects worth RM17.7 billion throughout the state over a period of five years (2006–2010). In Sarawak, the ruling party pledged to deliver 2,146 projects valued at RM29.9 billion (2010–2015) (*Borneo Post*, 2013). In addition to distributing development projects, Sarawak BN successfully completed RM32.2 billion worth of development projects, including roads, water and electricity utilities, public housing and health facilities, in the five years prior to the 2013 elections (*Borneo Post*, 2013). To further consolidate the support of rural Malaysians, especially Sabahans and Sarawakians, the BN government distributed RM1.9 billion in cash handouts under the Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia (BR1M) to 3.8 million poor households in 2012. A year later, the second BR1M was launched, affecting 7 million households and individuals, who received a total of RM3 billion in monetary incentives. Other handouts given prior to the 2013 elections included RM100 aid packages for school children and RM200 book vouchers for university students. Therefore, prior to its most competitive elections, the BN exploited its power of incumbency by allocating various

development projects and offering a host of handouts to fortify its role as the people's patron.

Table 6: BN and PR's popular vote based on urban-rural seats in Sabah and Sarawak, 2008 and 2013 (percentage)

Type of seats	2008				2013			
	Sabah (%)		Sarawak (%)		Sabah (%)		Sarawak (%)	
	BN	PR	BN	PR	BN	PR	BN	PR
Urban seats	50.6	46.0	53.8	46.3	47.8	45.6	45.4	54.3
Rural seats	64.6	28.7	69.3	20.6	56.8	33.2	64.6	29.9

Source: Election Commission Malaysia (2009: 151–199; 2013).

The effects of patronage on vote choice vary across constituencies and over time. Patronage is typically more effective among poorer voters because the marginal utility of extra income is greater for them than for voters with more means (Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1981; Kitschelt, 2000). This explains why the BN is relatively more popular in rural areas than among urban constituencies where the voters are more affluent and exposed to alternative information, which makes them more likely to seek change (see Table 6). For practical reasons, the poor are unlikely to forgo their livelihood for partisan politics or an ideological struggle. For the sake of survival, they are more likely to vote for the party that offers tangible promises that directly affect their everyday lives. When people are struggling to make ends meet, party politics do not feature prominently in their daily lives. Even when the poor want to shift their political allegiance, they fear they will lose the subsidies and benefits (such as monthly financial aid, fertilisers, seedlings, fishing nets and health services) that they currently receive from the government. Unlike in urban areas, the inhabitants of rural areas live in tight-knit communities. Thus, the local party branch, government agencies such as Jabatan Kemajuan Masyarakat (KEMAS) and community leaders are able to monitor changes in electoral support that would lead to the withdrawal of any form of aid that the individuals or households previously enjoyed. In addition to the poor, minority groups such as the Malay and Melanau of Sarawak tend to support the ruling party because their sense of insecurity is heightened compared to other numerically superior ethnic groups. In the 2013 elections, the majority of Malay-Melanau voters became the backbone of BN electoral dominance, as is evidenced by the BN's complete sweep of the Malay-Melanau majority seats.

In fact, the ruling party's popular vote increased among these constituencies, signalling the community's solid backing of the party (see Table 7). As minority groups that had long enjoyed the patronage of the incumbent

government, they are naturally reluctant to change the status quo. When the position of the incumbent is seriously challenged, these minorities tend to consolidate and give their undivided support to the ruling party because they fear losing its patronage. Over time, however, the effects of patronage could gradually weaken as the incumbent's access to public resources diminishes. Sabah and Sarawak had been excluded from mainstream development prior to the historic 2008 elections because the BN was so formidable in the Peninsula that it did not need Sabah and Sarawak votes. As a result, the allocation of development projects to the East Malaysian states declined significantly during the years prior to 2008 (Faisal, 2012). Hence, the source of patronage for Sabah and Sarawak also diminished, and the bond between the electorate and the incumbent government gradually weakened, as evidenced by the BN's declining popularity among Sabah and Sarawak voters. However, a flurry of development projects and handouts prior to the 2013 elections strengthened the ruling party's role and position as the people's patron, thus ensuring the BN's equilibrium dominance in Sabah and Sarawak. The Lahad Datu incident further accentuated the ruling party's role as patron because the BN provided various forms of aid and assistance (food, clothing, financial assistance, new housing for those who had to be relocated and the rescheduling of loan repayment) to the displaced Muslim bumiputera communities on Sabah's East Coast. This aid and assistance was also provided to pacify the disgruntled groups who were displeased with the slow response of the security forces to the invasion.

Table 7: BN's popular vote based on ethnically-divided seats in the 2013 General Elections in Sabah and Sarawak (percentage)

Type of seats	Sabah		Sarawak	
	2008 (%)	2013 (%)	2008 (%)	2013 (%)
Muslim bumiputera seats	68.9	61.5	77.2	81.4
Non-Muslim bumiputera seats	59.6	44.4	71.8	62.4
Chinese seats	35.6	34.2	50.7	40.6
Mixed seats	63.4	56.5	52.8	60.6

Source: Election Commission Malaysia (2009: 151–199; 2013).

Equally important in explaining the BN's equilibrium dominance in Sabah and Sarawak is the appeal of Malay-Muslim political dominance. At the core of the BN's electoral support in Sabah and Sarawak are the Muslim bumiputera, who constitute the largest community in Sabah and the second-largest in Sarawak. In the 2013 elections in Sabah, 15 Muslim bumiputera parliamentary seats were contested, followed by 6 non-Muslim bumiputera seats, 2 Chinese and 2 mixed seats. In Sarawak, 13 non-Muslim bumiputera parliamentary seats were contested, with the native Iban forming the largest

group, followed by 8 Muslim bumiputera seats, 6 Chinese and 4 mixed seats. As shown in Table 7, BN support among the Muslim bumiputera is significantly higher than among the non-Muslim bumiputera and the Chinese. Importantly, however, the BN's dominance over the Muslim bumiputera is never absolute; a significant number of them voted for the opposition. In fact, support for the BN among the Muslim bumiputera of Sabah declined in 2013, whereas support for the party among the Muslim bumiputera of Sarawak increased. Nevertheless, a significant majority of the Muslim bumiputera continue to support the ruling party because of political patronage and the need to uphold Malay Muslim political dominance.

In Sabah, the mass conversion of the natives to Islam by the United Sabah National Organisation (USNO) and BERJAYA-led government and later by the citizenship-for-votes project initiated by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's administration led to structural changes in the state's demographics. In 1960, 37.9% of the population was Muslim, followed by Christians (16.6%); approximately one-third was animists (Caldarola, 1982). By 2010, the Muslim population had increased to 65.4%, whereas Christians and Buddhists comprised 26.6% and 6.1% of the population, respectively (Department of Statistics, 2012: 92). As a result, the number of Muslim bumiputera parliamentary and state seats increased significantly, strengthening the Malay Muslim elites' claim to state power. To consolidate the multi-ethnic Muslim communities in Sabah, the state government, urged by the UMNO-led federal government, introduced an Islamisation programme that not only homogenised the Muslim population in Sabah but also bound them to state patronage. Led by Muslim bumiputera elites from the UMNO Sabah, the ruling government provided more patronage to the Muslim bumiputera at the expense of other communities. This strategy sent a clear message about the salience of Islam to relations of power and patronage. Thus, the strong electoral support for the Muslim bumiputera is motivated more by the Muslim-led government's ability to protect the sanctity of Islam and provide patronage than by the desire for an Islamic state. Therefore, the Muslim bumiputera were more inclined to return the incumbent Muslim-led government to power than other voters. Furthermore, the STAR's strong campaign in the 2013 elections and its criticism of the Muslim-led federal government also played a role in distancing the Muslim bumiputera from the opposition. The Muslim bumiputera may have felt intimidated by the strong ethno-religious tone of the KDM-dominated party. Hence, despite its 6.1% decline in the popular vote, the BN retained power among the Muslim bumiputera of Sabah by sweeping all 15 Muslim bumiputera seats and garnering more than 60% of the popular vote.

Unlike in Sabah, there was no concerted effort to change the demographic composition of Sarawak, though Abdul Rahman Yaakub conducted aggressive conversion exercises and Islamisation campaigns in the 1970s (Faisal, 2012). In 2010, Muslims comprised 30% of the population, whereas Christians remained the dominant group at 44%, followed by Buddhists at 13.5% and

practitioners of traditional Chinese religion at 6.0% (Statistics Department Malaysia, 2012: 13). Pressured by the federal government's national Islamisation campaign, the Muslim bumiputera elites of Sarawak carried out similar initiatives to please the federal leaders whose support allows them to remain in power. Throughout Rahman's and Taib's administrations, many "Islamic Projects", such as the construction of mosques, *surau* and religious schools, were carried out and financial assistance was given to Islamic groups (Faisal, 2012). In addition to the Islamic projects, the Muslim-led government also provided many forms of aid and offered development projects to Muslim bumiputera constituencies because they are the backbone of the PBB's electorate. To further consolidate Muslim bumiputera support, the BN Muslim leaders constantly reminded them of the importance of Muslim unity against the threat of the numerically superior non-Muslim bumiputera. Consequently, when the Chinese-dominated DAP made a significant gain in the 2011 state elections by winning a historic 10 seats, the Muslim bumiputera felt that their state power was threatened. They resoundingly supported the BN in the 2013 elections even though it was impossible for any Chinese party to gain control of the state single-handedly. The Islamisation campaign and the perceived threat of the non-Muslim voters consolidated the Muslim bumiputera behind the Muslim-led ruling party.

The third factor contributing to the BN's equilibrium dominance in Sabah and Sarawak is the ability of its political machinery to establish a presence at the grassroots level, especially in rural areas. Geographically, Malaysian Borneo is larger than the Peninsula, but its population is small and scattered across rough terrain. To access this scattered population, political parties need ample resources, continuous engagement programmes and long man-hours. In terms of party branches and members, the BN coalition parties in Sabah and Sarawak easily outnumber the opposition parties, primarily because of the BN's abundant resources and long presence. Since expanding to Sabah in 1994, UMNO Sabah has established 25 party divisions and more than 5,000 branches across the vast state (*Bernama*, 2013a). With 505,852 members, it is also the largest party in terms of membership, making Sabah the state with the highest UMNO membership in the country (*The Star*, 2012). Another senior BN Sabah coalition party, the PBS, has established 61 party divisions encompassing all of the state's seats, including the parliamentary seat of Labuan. The KDM-dominated party claims to have 160,000 members (*ABN News*, 2012). In Sarawak, the PBB is the largest party, with 71 party divisions and more than 1,000 branches and 270,212 members (*Sarawak Tribune*, 2013). Having replaced the SUPP as the second-largest party (in terms of electoral strength) in the BN Sarawak coalition, the PRS has 32 party divisions and approximately 60,000 members (*Free Malaysia Today*, 2013). Other smaller BN coalition parties have fewer divisions and branches and are primarily located in their traditional stronghold seats. With so many party divisions and branches, the BN can organise membership drives and campaign activities and monitor local communities. In addition, party

branches hold many social activities designed to persuade people to join the party and to reinforce their ties to the party. A senior PBB leader stated that the party "branches served as the 'eyes and ears' of the government to find the needs of the people and relay information on development programmes and projects to them" (*Borneo Post*, 2012). In reality, party branches are the "eyes and ears" the government uses to reward supporters and marginalise or punish detractors. In 2013, the BN party machinery organised thousands of public *ceramah* (public speeches) and numerous door-to-door meetings, meet-the-people sessions, futsal competitions and free health screenings. Party members also employ a K10 (Group of 10) strategy in which every party member monitors the political leanings of 10 individuals in their community so that appropriate measures can be taken. On polling day, the party machinery helps transport supporters to the polling stations and ensures that their votes remain with the ruling party.

The party machinery has the capacity to infiltrate society, but party feuds and weak grassroots leadership limit its capabilities. Many party divisions and branches are active only during election periods. In these circumstances, the BN depends on government machinery, both federal and state, to reach and build a presence within local communities. In Malaysia, the line that separates the ruling party and the government has blurred, and the former indiscriminately uses the latter as part of its political machinery. This has led to a partisan bureaucracy that supports the ruling party and carries out its agendas and promulgates its propaganda. Through various ministries, departments, divisional offices, district offices and sub-district offices, the state governments of Sabah and Sarawak have a greater capacity to communicate with the populace. These government agencies provide various services, distribute aid, organise social activities, implement infrastructure projects, offer assistance, hold festivals and enforce laws that fortify the presence of the state at the grassroots level. Although the practice of patronage and abuse of power has led to problems, the state government generally completes substantial development projects and delivers various forms of aid to Sabahans and Sarawakians. Using such measures, the ruling party has successfully established a presence at the grassroots level that is more effective than party machinery. One of the most influential state government programmes is the community leader institution, which is spread across thousands of villages and longhouses throughout the East Malaysian states. In stratified communities inhabited by Malays and Bajaus, local community leaders are still highly respected and supported. Thus, the ruling party can buy the support of community leaders by giving monetary rewards or other handouts in exchange for bloc votes.

Complementing the role of state government in establishing a grassroots presence in Sabah and Sarawak are the federal agencies. The four most influential federal agencies at the grassroots level, especially in rural areas, are the KEMAS, the police, the Information Department and Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM). The KEMAS is a presence in almost every village and longhouse in the country.

As the key institution of the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, the KEMAS offers a wide range of services, assistance and training to rural communities. It has a physical presence in every village and longhouse through the establishment of 317 nurseries and 9,599 pre-schools that are manned by 10,510 staff members throughout the country (Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, 2013). A year before the 2013 elections, the federal government allocated RM306.4 million for KEMAS pre-school education. During the same period, the federal government pledged to build 1,000 pre-schools, 50% of which would be in Sabah and Sarawak (*New Straits Times*, 2012). In addition to providing pre-school education, the KEMAS acts as the "eyes and ears" of the government and is part of its campaign machine. Because of its intimate community associations, the KEMAS and its employees can persuade the hearts and minds of the people through various community programs, services and aid. They also monitor political developments in the areas under their jurisdiction and lead election campaigns in areas where local party feuds are jeopardising the ruling party's power. The police also play an important role by feeding information about the strength of BN incumbents or new candidates to the ruling party and identifying potential threats from the opposition parties. Finally, the Information Department and RTM, both administered by the Ministry of Communication and Multimedia, are the propaganda machines of the ruling party.

The Information Department organises an endless stream of *ceramah*, face-to-face campaigns and exhibitions that promote government policies and explain current issues with the ultimate aim of ensuring the ruling party's victory. Prior to the 2013 elections, the Director General of the Information Department publicly declared his department's readiness to campaign for the government, especially in explaining the government's transformation programs: BR1M, 1Malaysia, People Housing 1Malaysia, Tyre 1Malaysia, Clinic 1Malaysia and Shop 1Malaysia (*Bernama*, 2012). It also published and distributed booklets to explain current issues and solidify the support of the masses for the ruling party while creating mistrust towards the opposition. In the 2013 elections, the Information Department distributed booklets with titles such as "1Malaysia Services and Products", "The Truth about the Sulu Demand on Sabah", "What Do You Get", "Transformation for All: Before and Now", "Najib's Present for the People", "Subsidy and Government Assistance" and "The Indians are Not Neglected". To further improve the ruling party's image and popularity, the government-owned media outlet, RTM, broadcasted positive news about the ruling party and portrayed negative images of the opposition. Similar to the Information Department, RTM aired various programmes that showcased the achievements of the ruling party and the aid it had given to the people. It also attacked the opposition's agenda of change and highlighted the fragility of the opposition coalition. Political advertisements promoting the BN's transformation programmes and emphasising the need to return the incumbent to ensure the

maintenance of the status quo were also aired by government radio and television stations. In rural areas, radios and televisions are the primary source of information. Therefore, the incumbent's strategy of exploiting government media undoubtedly shapes the public's political disposition in favour of the BN.

COUNTER-NARRATIVES AND THE OPPOSITION'S PARTY-BUILDING EFFORTS

Although the BN successfully retained equilibrium dominance in Sabah and Sarawak, its power was seriously challenged, especially in the contests for the Chinese and non-Muslim bumiputera seats. Despite the BN's incumbent advantages, the opposition was able to loosen the ruling party's grip on all of the Chinese seats and several of the non-Muslim bumiputera seats by creating strong and persuasive counter-narratives to the BN's patronage propaganda. Beginning with the 2011 Sarawak state election, the DAP delivered a strong message of change to the people of Sarawak. Adopting the tagline "*Ubah*" (Change), the DAP called for change in a state that had long been ruled by strongmen-politicians. This strongman rule had led to the abuse of power, rampant corruption, iron-fist rule, inequitable development, marginalisation of the Chinese and the natives, pro-business elite policies that discriminated against the masses and the proliferation of race-based politics. The DAP promised to uproot the long-entrenched parochial politics and promoted a new Sarawak that upholds democratic principles such as accountability and transparency, practices multi-racial politics and strives for equitable development. The national opposition party was able to communicate a warm and positive message of change by adopting the popular state icon, the hornbill as its mascot in the 2011 and 2013 elections. Although the Chinese had also enjoyed state patronage through the SUPP, they felt that the Chinese-dominated party had become increasingly ineffective. Feeling that they were treated as second-class citizens, the Chinese abandoned the SUPP and voted for the opposition. Because the Chinese are relatively wealthier and live in fully developed areas, they are more susceptible to messages promoting change than other ethnic groups. Having better access to alternative information via the Internet and the relatively independent Chinese newspapers also led to the erosion of BN support among the Chinese. The "*Ubah*" message was so effective that the PR adopted the slogan for the 2013 elections.

The counter-narratives and messages that the opposition conveyed to the bumiputera voters, particularly in the rural areas, were not as clear and persuasive as the "*Ubah*" campaign. The SWP's agenda was personal. It publicly declared that it was against the PRS but solidly supported the BN. This claim, however, was rejected by BN leaders and eventually led to the party's downfall. STAR Sarawak had been dormant for several elections, and the public was therefore

unaware of its political agenda. The PKR and PAS were also unconvincing, despite having a local presence since 1999. Although the PR coalition parties also used the message of change to persuade rural voters, the message was not clearly articulated. Change to what? If development is scarce and patronage is still needed, what change could the opposition offer? What about the fear of losing Malay-Muslim political dominance among the Muslim bumiputera voters? Would the PR parties address this concern? Left unanswered, these questions subsequently convinced a significant majority of the bumiputera voters in Sarawak to support the ruling party.

In Sabah, support for the DAP had also strengthened over the years. The parliamentary seat of Kota Kinabalu had been supporting the opposition for the last two terms, but the DAP had successfully recaptured Sandakan, which had a reputation as a strong opposition seat. As in Sarawak, the DAP Sabah adopted a moderate discourse to entice the Chinese urban voters. Issues of democracy, equality and multi-racialism proved to be effective in convincing the majority of the voters in Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan to support the DAP. In addition, the DAP also raised the Sabah issues, which contributed to its success in capturing the Chinese votes. Meanwhile, in the KDM and Muslim bumiputera seats, the counter-narratives offered by the opposition were not entirely clear and cohesive. All three opposition factions (PR, UBF and other opposition parties) had adopted state autonomy and rights as their main campaign issues. Demanding the reinstatement of the 20 points (special rights that were accorded to Sabah during the formation of Malaysia) and solutions to the "Sabah Problems", these parties seemed to desire the recreation of an old Sabah that many young voters could not relate to. Furthermore, the state autonomy discourse turned Sabah opposition parties into niche parties that appealed to only a small group of voters. However, several opposition candidates offered more persuasive counter-narratives, including Darell Leiking of the PKR, who won the KDM seat of Penampang. Using the slogan "*Selamatkan Penampang*" (Save Penampang) and "Penampang: It's Time to Change", Darell raised state and local issues that were important and relevant to his constituents, including corruption, inequitable distribution of state aid, illegal immigrants, Project IC, Sabah autonomy and cronyism in UMNO Sabah, to lure voters to the PKR. These issues were also used by other opposition candidates in Sabah, but Darell was able to articulate them in a much more persuasive, penetrating and personalised manner. As a practicing lawyer, Darell's people-friendly demeanour and critical mind helped him convince voters that the BN is no longer fit to rule and represent the people of Penampang. Without committing character assassination, Darell also attacked the BN incumbent for failing to defy the BN with regard to Sabah issues and the representation of the KDM. The young rising PKR leader urged voters to choose a more inclusive, accountable and democratic system by voting for the PKR. Because Darell had begun campaigning in the constituency immediately after he was elected PKR division chief in 2010, he was able to regularly communicate with many of his

voters. In addition, he employed a personal approach in his campaign by holding many *ceramah kelompok* (cluster campaigns), which are more effective because they allow the candidate and voters to engage in a more interactive and meaningful dialogue. Penampang is a semi-urban constituency with a sizeable population of affluent voters that are not dependent on state patronage. In fact, after being marginalised by the Malay Muslim-led government, the KDM in Penampang had nothing to lose by voting for the opposition. The opposition could have won more seats in Sabah if not for multi-corner contests. In four KDM seats (Kota Marudu, Keningau, Tenom and Pensiangan), less than 50% of the popular vote went to the BN, but the opposition votes were split between the PKR, KITA, SAPP, STAR and Independents.

Dominant party advantages create four party-building challenges for opposition parties: the problem of appeals, the problem of voter communication, the problem of personnel recruitment and the problem of intra- and inter-party coordination (Greene, 2007: 59). Although the incumbent can use patronage to buy voter support, the opposition attracts voters through programmatic appeals and candidate qualities alone. Opposition parties can engage in local-level canvassing designed to dissuade voters from accepting patronage, but voters may feel that the material benefits of receiving monetary rewards and other handouts are too advantageous to forego. Dominant parties' control over the government also discourages private donors from funding opposition parties (Jacobson, 1980; Goodlife, 2001). The threat of economic retribution in some dominant party systems also makes it strategically foolish for major donors to support opposition parties. As a result, opposition parties lack the capacity to strengthen themselves and subsequently challenge dominant party advantages. Nonetheless, the DAP has defied the odds, undertaking more party-building programmes since the 1999 election. In Sarawak, the DAP conducted leadership transition exercises to phase out senior party leaders (i.e., Chong Siew Chiang, Wong Ho Leng and Wong Si Nang) and introduce young professionals (i.e., Chong Chieng Jen, Violet Yong and Alice Lau). In addition, the national opposition party has consistently participated in electoral politics in Sabah and Sarawak since its debut in 1978, making it the oldest opposition party in both states. The DAP has also been aggressive in establishing new branches and conducting membership drives, especially among the youth. To raise funds for the party, the DAP has also organised many fund-raising dinners, which have been well attended and supported. During the 2013 elections, it was clearly the most organised and well-prepared party among the opposition parties. It had a clear campaign theme, well-coordinated and publicised *ceramah*, strong logistical support and attractive campaign materials. The new candidates fielded by the party during the elections had been identified several years prior to the elections so that they could do preparatory groundwork. Because of these efforts in building the party, the DAP is seeing the fruits of its labour: the party captured almost all of the Chinese seats available in both states. Currently, the party is planning to make inroads in rural

areas by opening new party branches, appointing potential candidates to start groundwork and allocating special fund for various community projects.

CONCLUSION

After 71 years, the opposition parties in Mexico finally shattered the ruling party's dominance. In addition to losing incumbent advantages, the downfall of the PRI was also caused by rapid democratisation that had made electoral contests more competitive, thus allowing the opposition to seriously challenge the PRI's entrenched power. At the same time, the opposition parties were becoming increasingly appealing to the electorate as they underwent a process of transformation from being niche to catchall parties. In Sabah and Sarawak, the BN's dominance is still intact because the ruling party is still enjoying incumbent advantages, especially with regard to its continued access to state resources that it uses to provide political patronage. To further consolidate its position, the BN has used the issue of Malay Muslim political dominance to maintain the loyalty of the Muslim bumiputera, who constitute the core support of the ruling party.

Although Greene (2007) opines that opposition parties cannot challenge dominant parties as long as they have access to state resources, the DAP has proven that this is not always the case. Despite the BN's incumbent advantages, the DAP offers persuasive counter-narratives and carries out party-building initiatives that weaken the ruling party's influence on the East Malaysian Chinese. Key to the DAP's political ascendancy is the party's decision to project a moderate image, a decision that has transformed the party from a niche to a catchall party. Other opposition parties, especially those that contest the bumiputera seats, have yet to replicate the DAP's success. This is evidenced by the BN's success among bumiputera voters in the 2013 elections. In addition to strong counter-narratives and party-building initiatives, the opposition can unseat the incumbent only if there is a level playing field. Unlike in Mexico, the electoral contest in Malaysia is still far from being free and fair. The ruling government has the power to rig the election if necessary to retain its power. As indicated by the Bersih People's Tribunal, the 2013 election was not free and fair and had been manipulated by rampant vote-buying, gerrymandering, advance voting, the sudden transfer of voters to other polling stations, organised plans to allow immigrants to vote for the BN, the failure of indelible ink, the lack of freedom of the press and the indiscriminate use of government institutions for campaigning (*Aliran*, 2013). Without free and fair elections, it will be difficult for the opposition to reach voters, especially those in rural areas. Nevertheless, the PR has made significant strides in its bid to unseat the incumbent government. It increased its seat tally and popular vote in Sabah and Sarawak despite failing to overcome the BN's electoral dominance. In addition to promoting democratisation, the opposition must rethink its strategy for persuading the

bumiputera electorate. Counter-narratives that either reassure the bumiputera that their source of patronage would not cease to exist if they supported the opposition or convince them to stop their dependency on patronage must be created to break the BN's stranglehold over these voters. Special messages should also assure the Muslim bumiputera of their rights and well-being as a Muslim community. The opposition should also build a lasting presence within the community through party-building efforts at the grassroots level to win the hearts and minds of the people. Unless the opposition addresses all of these issues, the people of Sabah and Sarawak will not be able to see a viable alternative to the incumbent.

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