

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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Malaysia is a representative democracy. Regular elections are held to choose the 222 parliamentary representatives and 13 state legislative assembly representatives. The Parti Perikatan and its successor, Barisan Nasional (BN), gained more than two-thirds of the seats in the federal parliament from 1955 to 2008 (except in 1969). This record was broken in 2008 as a result of the emergence of the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) and the defeat of BN in five states. In 2013, BN failed to maintain its customary two-thirds majority for the second time under Malaysia's sixth Prime Minister, Najib Razak. Sabah and Sarawak BN emerged as "fixed deposit states" in both the 2008 and 2013 elections, contributing a sufficient number of seats to prevent PR from assuming control of the federal government.

BN was ultimately defeated in 2018, and the Pakatan Harapan (PH) (formerly PR) took control. Sabah BN also succumbed, bringing an end to its decades-long reign in Sabah. BN retained power in Sarawak despite losing half of its seats to the opposition and enduring defeats at the national and state levels. Sarawak BN under Abang Johari Openg (also known as Abang Jo) moved swiftly to form the Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) in an effort to separate the ruling local elites from their federal BN coalition allies. By severing ties with BN, GPS intended to preserve its ability to align itself with other potential federal allies.

Abang Jo and GPS were put to test at the 2021 Sarawak State Election (henceforth SSE21). Many predicted that GPS would prevail with a comfortable majority, winning more than 72 seats (Puyok 2021a, 11). As it turned out, GPS won more than 90% of the seats in the state assembly during SSE21 (Puyok 2021b, 11). Given that newcomers such as the Parti Sarawak Bersatu (PSB) were able to match GPS in terms of campaign publicity, many analysts were surprised by the outcome of

the election. As the majority of candidates for PSB and the Parti Bumi Kenyalang (PBK) were newcomers, there was considerable interest in these parties.

SSE21 is significant for numerous reasons. First, this was GPS's first election since the coalition's founding in 2018. Second, the election was crucial for Abang Jo, as he sought the mandate of the people to govern for another five years. Third, all eyes were on GPS as it strived to surpass the 72 seats won by Adenan Satem (also affectionately known as Tok Nan) in 2016. Fourth, the election was the third to be held under COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) (the first and second elections were held in Sabah and Melaka, respectively). Finally, the election had the power to determine the future trajectory of Sarawak politics and federal-state relations.

Even with a relatively low voter turnout at 55%, the election results demonstrated GPS's widespread popularity. Even though PSB and PBK have made inroads in Chinese areas, a closer examination of the popular vote revealed that Chinese support for GPS has shifted significantly. In rural and Dayak areas, GPS maintained its dominance, but PSB was able to make its presence felt among Dayak voters. In the upcoming election, could PSB be the next challenger to GPS's Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS)? What factors contributed to GPS's phenomenal success? Could this be because of the poor voter turnout? What impact did the SOPs have on election outcomes? How would the results impact the politics of Sarawak over the next five years and the political trajectory of federal-state relations? These are a few of the most important areas that this Special Issue will address.

The specific objectives of this Special Issue are as follows: (1) to provide a detailed analysis of the results of SSE21; (2) to examine voting patterns across different constituencies, localities, and demographics; (3) to explore the factors that account for GPS's massive victory and issues that matter to voters; and (4) to discuss the implications of the election on local politics and the future trajectory of federal-state relations.

Numerous election-related studies have already been conducted in Malaysia. Why, then, is a Special Issue on an election in Sarawak required? Elections in Malaysia have been thoroughly analysed, whereas elections in Sarawak remain poorly understood. Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia exhibit ethnic politics, patron-client relationships, and politics of development somewhat differently (Loh 1997). Sarawak, for instance, is more ethnically diverse than Peninsular Malaysia. Ethnic politics is less intense in Sarawak because there is no dominant ethnic group and regional sentiment is stronger than individual ethnic sentiment.

Instead of competing on the basis of ethnicity, local elites are motivated by regional sentiment and control of state resources (Faisal 2009). Nonetheless, this does not imply that there is absolutely no ethnic politics in Sarawak. In contrast to Peninsular Malaysia, competition for political influence among the numerous ethnic subgroups differentiated by social status and culture is manifested in a subtler manner. In the interior area of Sarawak, for instance, scholars examine the competition between the Kenyah and the Kayan for political representation. Even within the Kenyah and Kayan communities, social class is a significant electoral issue (Ngau 2017; Sellato 2002).

Similar to Peninsular Malaysia, the phenomenon of patronage politics persists in Sarawak (Milne 1973, 891–903). However, it should be pointed out that the impetus behind patron-client relationships is not solely motivated by monetary benefits, social standing, or safeguarding interests (Scott 1972). Puyok (2005; 2006; 2017) has documented the existence of similar networks between politicians and churches in Sarawak's highlands, specifically in the remote area of Ba' Kelalan. Political leaders utilise religious institutions as a basis for their political mobilisation efforts and rely on religious sentiments to garner support. Puyok (2005; 2006; 2017) observes that the patron-client relationship is characterised by cultural ties, religious affiliation, and shared values. The manifestation of patronage politics is reflected in various forms, and Sarawak is a compelling example of the practical application of patronage politics. To gain an in-depth understanding of the political terrain in Sarawak, it is imperative for academics to depart from the conventional method of examining Malaysian politics exclusively through the lens of the Malay-non-Malay political dichotomy and the impact of development on voting behaviours (Chin 2014).

Sarawak is a distinct state that exhibits a notable degree of insulation from federal politics. The Malaysia Agreement of 1963 (MA63), autonomy, and the identity of Sarawak remain prevalent topics in the public domain (Chin 2018; Puyok and Hafizan 2023). This Special Issue will also examine the importance of regional concerns in SSE21 and their impacts on the outcomes of the election. Furthermore, it is interesting to explore the impact of the COVID-19 SOPs on political mobilisation and election campaigning. Sarawak was the third state to conduct an election in compliance with the SOPs implemented due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Were the SOPs disadvantageous to the opposition? To what extent did the SOPs impact the degree of participation from both voters and candidates? What were the voter outreach strategies utilised by GPS and the opposition amidst the limitations on candidate mobility?

The present Special Issue gathers experienced and emerging scholars of Sarawak politics across diverse fields of study to scrutinise SSE21 from multiple vantage points and perspectives. The Special Issue is titled “The 2021 Sarawak State Election: Outcomes and Implications,” with the aim of providing an analysis of the election outcomes and their potential ramifications on both local and national political landscapes.

Neilson Ilan, Arnold Puyok and Farah Zaini provide an overview of SSE21 in the first article. They attribute the rise of GPS in the election to three interconnected factors: incumbent advantage, low voter turnout that was more advantageous to the ruling coalition than the opposition, and voter dissatisfaction with the opposition’s performance during its short stint in power. They also examine the implications of COVID-19 restrictions on campaigning, arguing that these impeded the mobility of candidates and diminished the personal touch between candidates and voters – an element that has become a defining characteristic of campaigning in the rural areas of Sarawak. They argue that while the future of GPS in Sarawak appears promising, political shifts at the federal level and a possible shift in support from the ruling party to the opposition, particularly local opposition parties, threatened GPS’s dominance in Sarawak politics.

In the second article, Ivy Jugah and Hafizan Mohamad Naim assess the performance of PH in SSE21. According to Ivy Jugah and Hafizan Mohamad Naim, the poor performance of PH in Sarawak can be attributed to three main factors. First, the local-based political parties were able to capitalise on PH’s structural vulnerabilities. Second, the local political elites were successful in promoting the “Sarawak First” sentiment, which fostered a sense of solidarity among the people of Sarawak. Lastly, the absence of a shared political ideology that united the opposition parties within PH also negatively impacted their performance. In order to maintain its relevance in local politics, it is imperative for PH to undertake efforts to reconstruct its public image and devise political strategies that are tailored to the needs of the electorate in Sarawak.

The Dayak community represents the most populous ethnic group in Sarawak, and securing their support is of utmost importance for the local political elite. The article by Arnold Puyok primarily centres on the manifestation of Dayak politics during the election and the factors that impacted the voting patterns of the Dayak. The article examines the extent to which the term “Dayakism” has gained popularity among Dayak voters, as a result of its promotion by nationalist Dayak-based political parties such as the Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak Baru (PBDSB). According to Puyok, while Dayakism is an integral part of the Dayak psyche, it failed to garner broad acceptance among the Dayak community due to the

community's preoccupation with more relevant matters pertaining to economic survival and development. The failure of Dayakism to garner support from Dayak voters could be attributed to the prevalence of the Sarawak First sentiment, which had a significant impact in surpassing individual ethnic affiliations among the Dayak community.

Moving from Dayak to Chinese politics, Ngu Ik Tien's article examines the voting patterns and pro-opposition leanings of the Sarawakian Chinese in SSE21. Beginning with the 2006 state election, the article describes how the national opposition alliances, notably the Barisan Alternatif (BA), and PR, gained popularity among Chinese voters in Sarawak. In SSE21, the voting trends revealed changes in Chinese voting patterns, from a voting bloc to fragmented votes, and their openness to local opposition parties. The article examines two urban constituencies with a Chinese majority, Batu Lintang and Bukit Assek, to assess the plurality of the voting patterns and the degree of fragmentation of Chinese votes. The article argues that local and national political developments had a profound effect on the political leanings of the Chinese, including their tendency to embrace regionalism. This article also argues that the decision to support minor parties advocating for separatism can be interpreted as strategic voting by regional minorities who feel deprived of equal rights, and that political fragmentation among the Chinese may persist if PH fails to consolidate its previous support. Ngu Ik Tien argues that the viability of local opposition parties depends on the parties' internal reform and efforts to reduce the influence of personality politics.

Social media is becoming an increasingly vital instrument for political leaders to communicate with their supporters. Through social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, they can communicate with their supporters and promote their campaigns. Malaysia is one of the countries with the highest number of social media users, particularly Facebook users, so the move is both viable and comprehensible. The purpose of the article by Hafizan Mohamad Naim and Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani is to identify the prominent issues discussed on social media and correlate them with the issues highlighted in GPS's election manifesto. The article argues that there is congruence between the issues raised by Sarawakians during Sarawak's tenure as an opposition state in 2018 and the themes included in the GPS manifesto for SSE21. Hafizan Mohamad Naim and Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani conclude that the three most important issues for Sarawakians are constitutional and legal issues pertaining to Sarawak rights, regional sentiments relating to the ideals of being a Sarawakian, and federal-state relations issues.

The application of geographic information system (GIS) to analyse election result has been gaining popularity in academic writing. In their article, Farah Zaini,

Neilson Ilan Mersat and Arnold Puyok used three different spatial analyses to investigate the spatial distributions and concentrations of Dayak-majority constituencies in the 2016 and 2021 elections. These analyses are the Thematic Map – Density, the Spatial Autocorrelation Moran’s I Analysis, and the Hot Spot Analysis – Getis-Ord G_i^* . The authors argue that there are significant differences in the density of voter participation, majorities obtained by candidates and total votes cast by the electorate across the state in both state elections. This confirms the assertion made by researchers of electoral politics in Sarawak that election issues are primarily location-specific, and that it is essential to understand the challenges that are faced by communities at the local level.

The politics of Sarawak has long been influenced by patronage. In fact, it is one of the most common topics in the study of electoral politics in the state. One of the primary reasons for its dominance and popularity is that rural voters are economically dependent on the government. The ruling coalition has the means to provide development assistance to the people and thereby win their support. Prior to and during an election, it is common for contracts, on-site development assistance, and cash assistance to be awarded (Faisal 2009; Aeria 2005; Mersat 2009). Patronage politics is not an entirely new subject and has been extensively studied, particularly in this region. The article by Anthony Tutong and Neilson Ilan Mersat is compelling because it presents a variant of patronage politics in Batang Ai through the practice of *tungkus asi*, a form of compensation that voters receive for showing up to vote. Despite being viewed by some as a form of vote-buying, *tungkus asi* has become an accepted practice of the political process at the grassroots level among the Iban.

Lucy Sebli’s article is a continuation of Anthony Tutong and Neilson Ilan Mersat’s study on political patronage; however, it focuses on the roles that the Women’s Bureau and Youth Wing of PRS and the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) played during SSE21. Using the concept of clientelism as a framework, Lucy Sebli investigates the mutually beneficial relationships that exist between the candidates, the women’s bureau and the youth wing. The rewards and services supplied by candidates prior to and after the election are analysed in this article, with a particular focus on how they increased the support of members of the women’s bureau and youth wing for incumbent candidates. For the purpose of this study, Lucy Sebli carried out fieldworks in parts of Meluan and Tamin that are largely inhabited by Ibans.

The article by Malia Taibi, Amar Redza Ahmad Rizal and Siti Haslina Hussin focuses on the essences of the election manifestos promoted by prominent local parties such as GPS, PSB, and PBK. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), they

analysed the manifestos' central messages. The focus was on the manner in which these political parties articulated and presented their core beliefs regarding state nationalism, economic development, and interethnic relations. They demonstrate that GPS was more effective in conveying its messages to the electorate because the messages evoked a sense of belonging and pride among Sarawakians. Despite the fact that nationalist parties such as PBK were also leveraging on the "Sarawak for Sarawakian" sentiment, their plan for Sarawak to secede from Malaysia was deemed too extreme. GPS was also able to present a new narrative regarding how Sarawak politics should be viewed, namely that GPS is a locally-based party capable of fighting for Sarawak's rights. The economic messages of GPS were also deemed more compelling than those of other local parties.

The nine articles featured in this Special Issue demonstrate that Sarawak politics is distinct from that of Peninsular Malaysia. This is due to the fact that the factors that impact state politics and drive the voting preferences of the people are specific to Sarawak. This Special Issue will highlight the results of SSE21 and their potential impacts on the state and country at large. As editors, we recognise that the present work may not encompass other significant facets of politics in Sarawak. The primary objective of the Special Issue is to stimulate the curiosity of academics who are interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the political landscape of Sarawak. The Special Issue is expected to serve as a point of reference for those seeking to enhance their grasp of local politics and as a catalyst for further research into electoral politics in Malaysia.

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