

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

Neilson Ilan Mersat*, Arnold Puyok* and Farah Zaini

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Sarawak, Malaysia

*Corresponding authors: mnilan@unimas.my; parnold@unimas.my

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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

state being the first to vaccinate teenagers from the age of 16–17 years old and also the first to offer the third dose of vaccination (Fatimah 2022).

SSE21 was held amid political uncertainties due to conflicts among the political elites at the federal level. But politics in Sarawak remained relatively stable, owing to the ability of GPS leaders to close ranks under Abang Jo. Given GPS's incumbency advantage, the coalition was slated to win the election with little problem. A majority of GPS leaders were also quite known to the voters, and with numerous resources at its disposal, the ruling coalition appeared to have more clout than the opposition in securing the people's support.

The 14th General Election and the Dayak Shifts

One very glaring pattern in the electoral outcomes during the 14th General Election (GE14) was a vote swing in the Dayak-majority seats. The shift from BN to Pakatan Harapan (PH) in the Dayak-majority constituencies caught many by surprise, especially after the big win by Sarawak BN in SSE16 earlier (Mersat 2018). Therefore, many expected that the wind of change would continue to blow in SSE21. The vote swing from BN to PH in GE14 was attributed to many factors. The first factor was candidacy dispute and infighting, which appeared to be the strongest common explanation for BN's defeat in all the six Dayak-majority constituencies.¹ The second factor was the natives' discontent over the alleged attempt by private companies to develop native customary lands for development. Third, BN's electoral hegemony was also eroded by the growing interest of Sarawakians in national issues propounded by national-based parties such as Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). The fourth factor was the opposition's ability in promoting its "Going Rural" campaign tagline particularly in Mas Gading. By doing so, DAP especially was able to drive home the message that the opposition knew how to develop Sarawak's rural areas. Finally, advancement in technology especially the extensive use of social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter provided the opposition with an easier, cheaper and more effective election campaigning compared to conventional methods.

The shift in support from BN to PH had, to a certain extent, undermined the state's position and bargaining power with regard to issues related to the Malaysian Agreement 1963 (MA63). It was also an indicator that support for Sarawak BN had declined tremendously and affected Sarawak's "fixed deposit" status as all the seats won by PH were formerly known as BN strongholds. Given this major swing of support to the opposition at the national level, could GPS turn the tide of Dayak support in SSE21?

This article examines the results of SSE21 and explains GPS's major victory. It probes into the main issues and how these impacted the major outcomes of the election. As SSE21 was held during the COVID-19 pandemic, the discussion also includes how political mobilisation and campaigning were carried out amid the enforcement of the standard operating procedures (SOPs).

This article is based on a series of fieldworks conducted in various districts in Sarawak during and prior to SSE21. Interviews and observations were conducted before and after the election. Some of the areas covered during the election and post-election trips were Kuching, Sri Aman, Betong, Sarikei and Sibu. The researchers also visited several long houses located in the interior of Sri Aman and Betong divisions to interview selected community leaders (such as the head of a longhouse or *tuai rumah*) and members of several political parties. Secondary data for this article were gathered from sources such as newspapers, books and the internet while the electoral data were tabulated from the Election Commission's website.

POLITICAL PARTIES

Prior to SSE21, it was widely predicted that the incumbent GPS would go into the election as the clear favourite to win by a landslide. GPS is made up of Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS), Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) and Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP). In SSE16 under Adenan, BN swept 72 of the 82 seats or almost 90% of the seats in the SLA. Following BN's defeat at the federal level in GE14, the four Sarawak parties representing Sarawak BN – PBB, PRS, PDP and SUPP – withdrew from BN and formed GPS. But instead of going against BN, GPS decided to form an "informal alliance" with BN and Perikatan Nasional (PN) at the federal level.

The opposition parties under PH contested in 62 seats. PKR contested in 28 seats, DAP in 26 seats and Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH) in eight seats. One of the parties that was seen to mount a credible challenge in the election was PSB, headed by former State Finance Minister, Wong Soon Koh. PSB, which had six seats in the SLA prior to the election, contested in 70 seats. PSB is a splinter party of the SUPP and was previously called United People's Party (UPP). The party rebranded itself as PSB in December 2018 before opting to become independent in July 2019 following the resignation of Wong Soon Koh from the state cabinet. Another new local-based party contesting in the election was PBK, which contested in 73 seats, the second highest number of seats after GPS. Another party campaigning along the same lines as PSB and PBK was Sarawak People's Aspiration Party (ASPIRASI), which contested in 15 seats.

ASPIRASI, led by Lina Soo, contested in Sibu, Miri and Bintulu, as well as four other seats in Kuching. Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak Baru (PBDSB) from the Gabungan Anak Sarawak (GASAK) coalition contested in all 82 seats and named the party's president, Bobby William, as the candidate for chief minister. GASAK is an alliance of state-based political groups such as ASPIRASI and Sarawak Workers' Party (SWP), leaders from the deregistered PBDSB and leaders of Sarawak for Sarawakians (S4S)² as well as Sarawak Independence Alliance (SIA).³

THE PRE-ELECTION SCENARIO

SSE21 was definitely not a level playing field and the strict COVID-19 SOPs made it difficult for political parties and candidates to mobilise support. Interestingly, the election was held when politicians from both sides of the divides chose to sign a ceasefire agreement. On 13 September 2021, the federal government led by Ismail Sabri as Prime Minister signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the opposition to establish a bipartisan cooperation for the sake of political stability (Kumar 2021). It was indeed a historic event in the country that had seen the collapse of two governments since GE14 due to power struggle. The King, who played a prominent role during the political crises, decreed for the politicians to work as one team and set aside the "winner takes all" mentality. The MOU was signed at the parliament's banquet hall, with Ismail Sabri Yaakob representing the government and Anwar Ibrahim, Lim Guan Eng, Mohamad Sabu and Wilfred Madius Tangau representing the four component parties of PH.

The key details of the MOU are as follows (Amir 2021):

1. As part of the agreement, the government had agreed not to dissolve the parliament before 31 July 2022.
2. The MOU stated that the PH bloc would either support or abstain during the vote to pass the national budget, related supply bills as well as other bills or motions construed as confidence votes.
3. The MOU also called for both sides to agree on administrative transformations, such as the Anti-Party Hopping Bill, which if passed, would prevent politicians elected on one party's platform from defecting to another party.
4. The MOU also outlined parliamentary reforms, including equal funding for members of parliament (MPs) from the ruling government as well as MPs involved in the agreement. More parliamentary select committees should also be set up, while existing ones should be restructured.

5. To cater to additional needs in handling the COVID-19 pandemic, the MOU stated that the government would table an extra fiscal injection of RM45 billion (US\$10.87 billion) in the parliament for approval. The sum would be used to strengthen the healthcare system, extend financial help to the people and support continuity of businesses.

On 2 November 2021 the King lifted the emergency to give way to SSE21. The SLA, whose expiry date was in June 2021, was dissolved on the same day. There were allegations that the state government was manipulating COVID-19 cases in Sarawak in order to allow for SSE21. The state government denied that it was manipulating the data on daily COVID-19 cases, which were then on a downward trend, claiming that the drop in COVID-19 cases in Sarawak was due to the state government's high vaccination rates. The state government also said that the COVID-19 cases were reported daily by the Ministry of Health and that they played no part in these reports (Teoh 2021). Defending its decision to hold SSE21 early, the state government argued that more than 90% of the eligible recipients had completed two doses of COVID-19 vaccination, which equaled 75.5% of the state's total population (Goh 2021). Despite the assurance from the state government, Anwar insisted that SSE21 be postponed if the health and safety of the public were at risk (*Bernama* 2021).

CAMPAIGNS AND ISSUES

The field was a bit crowded during SSE21, with more political parties contesting this time around. A total of 349 candidates contested in 82 seats. Unlike the previous elections, no single seat was won uncontested, indicating that the opposition parties were keen to give a strong challenge to GPS.

GPS contested in all 82 state seats, followed by 73 from PBK, 70 from PSB, 28 from PKR, 26 from DAP, 15 from ASPIRASI, 11 from PBDSB, 8 from AMANAH, 5 from Parti Sedar Rakyat Sarawak (SEDAR) and 1 from Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). There were also 30 candidates contesting as independents (Amanda 2021) (see Table 1).

The strict SOPs imposed during the election had made political mobilisation difficult. This time around, the campaign movements were restricted to certain areas and times. In Sarawak, elections used to be equated with some festival of sorts but SSE21 was less merry. *Ceramah* (political talks) and public speeches during the campaign period were only allowed in 64 constituencies with poor internet access (Nais 2021a).

Table 1: State of parties contested in SSE21

Political parties	Number of seats contested
Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS)	82
Pakatan Harapan (PH)	62
Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS)	1
Parti Sarawak Bersatu (PSB)	70
Sarawak People's Aspiration Party (ASPIRASI)	15
Parti Bumi Kenyalang (PBK)	73
Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak Baru (PBDSB)	11
Parti Sedar Rakyat Sarawak (SEDAR)	5
Independent	30
Total	349

The number of attendees for *ceramah* and public speeches should be 50% of the premises' capacity or a maximum of 150 people at one time, and attendance was limited to residents of the respective villages or longhouses. Each *ceramah* was given a period of two hours and could not be held after 10 at night. The *ceramah* should also be held in a contained environment such as a community hall and *ruai* (foyer of a longhouse), in addition to prohibition of entertainment activities during campaigning. Other rules imposed were compulsory wearing of face masks, physical distancing of at least one metre, allowing only fully vaccinated individuals to attend the *ceramah* and providing a health screening counter. As the movements of candidates were restricted by the SOPs, the Election Commission (EC) encouraged them to use various social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp and Telegram as well as television networks and local newspapers to conduct their campaign (Chung 2021a).

The SSE21 had been the “most difficult and challenging” due to COVID-19 SOPs. The opposition parties complained that the SOPs impacted them the most, claiming that the SOPs for the election were aimed at containing the opposition's campaign trail rather than the COVID-19 virus itself (Chung 2021a). Sarawak DAP Chief, Chong Chieng Jen asserted that the SOPs (pertaining to the *ceramah*) were formulated not to control the pandemic but to manipulate the election to the advantage of GPS (Nais 2021a). DAP also claimed that the SOPs were “improper and unfair” and questioned the decision to allow *ceramah* to be held in 64 areas with poor internet coverage. DAP argued that the fact that 64 out of 82 state constituencies in Sarawak had poor internet coverage was a testament to GPS's poor performance at governing the state over the past 50 years (Nais 2021b).

The imposition of strict SOPs attracted the attention of several Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) that supported political gatherings in both urban and rural areas, provided that parties adhere to the SOPs. They also recommended that for house-to-house visits and face-to-face leafleting, the number of campaigners should be restricted to a small group, i.e., about three persons, and they should not enter any houses or rooms of the longhouses.

Issues

A study of the election manifestos by GPS, PSB, PH, PBK and PBDS suggests that there were several key issues during SSE21.

Development

Development has always been the key issue in every election in Sarawak. The argument is that development in the form of infrastructure is important for Sarawak as it can help propel the state to be at par with the rest of other states in the federation. The people in rural areas particularly need more physical development such as water and electricity supply, roads, schools and other basic amenities. In their campaigns, the GPS leaders focused on development issues and promised to bring Sarawak to a “developed status” by the year 2030.

GPS also promised to transform the economy and implement more development projects for the people if the party is returned to power, including to expand the state’s roads, port and airport networks, and improving water, electricity and gas supply coverage.

On the other side of the divide, the opposition said that “development is a right” and that nobody can be denied of this essential public good, claiming that “development is the responsibility of the government” (Koffi 1998).

To counter GPS’s reliance on the development issue to entice the voters, DAP posited that Sarawakians must be daring enough to change or *berani ubah* (Isaiah 2016). If they were voted into power, DAP would improve dilapidated schools as well as transform the environment and the state civil service. Similarly, the PBDSB’s manifesto emphasised the improvement of basic infrastructure like schools and clinics, in addition to providing financial assistance to the poor (Umpang 2021).

Land Issue

Native Customary Land (NCR) issue remained a salient issue for the voters in Sarawak especially among the Dayaks. Land right activists and the opposition were vehement in campaigning for the right of the Dayaks to own land. The natives' discontent over their customary lands stemmed from their fears that their lands would be developed by private companies or government agencies indiscriminately in the name of development.

From the opposition's point of view, the state government should be held responsible for the "loss" of NCR land in Sarawak as the companies that are allegedly involved in "land grabs" are linked to the powers that be. Land issue was also the concern of some urban voters who were unhappy about the high premium that they had to pay when renewing their land lease. Seeing the importance of land issues to the public, PBK promised to help the poor by giving agricultural land to the farmers (Ling, H. 2021). In responding to criticisms over NCR land issue management, GPS said that the state government would recognise and guarantee people's rights to NCR land and Native Territorial Domain (NTD)⁴ should they remain in power.

Multiethnic Representation in the State Cabinet and a Dayak Chief Minister

Ethnic politics also plays a role in Sarawak's electoral politics but it is not as full blown as in Peninsular Malaysia. As the Dayaks form more than 40% of the population in the state, securing their support is crucial. This was the reason why PSB and PBK made solemn promises to appoint a Dayak as chief minister (Boon 2021). PSB also promised to appoint four deputy chief ministers to represent the key ethnic groups in Sarawak including making the state cabinet more representative to reflect Sarawak's multicultural make-up.

Kuching-Kuala Lumpur Relations

The issue of federal state relations has been equally popular in the past elections. It was often argued that the federal government should focus more on a backward state like Sarawak by allocating more federal funds for the state. Good federal state relations is considered important for the development of Sarawak and also the stability of the country.

The lowest point in relations between Sarawak and the federal government was in 1966, when the federal parliament used emergency powers to alter Sarawak's constitution following a conflict between the state government under Stephen Kalong Ningkan and the federal government under Tunku Abdul Rahman (Chin 1997). For GPS, it is imperative that the present GPS-led state government remain in power as it has close ties with the federal government. This is to ensure smooth continuation of development projects in the state. GPS reasoned that it is difficult for people-centric development projects to continue if the state government does not enjoy a cordial relationship with the federal government (Boon 2021).

However, PBK viewed Sarawak's position in the federation differently, proposing for a separation from Kuala Lumpur instead of establishing close ties with the federal leaders. According to PBK President, Voon Lee Shan, Sarawak has the right to secede from the federation (Chung 2021b). He also reiterated that it was a mistake to join Malaysia, calling ties with Putrajaya "not workable" in the interests of the state. Lee Shan argued that the formation of Malaysia was null and void from many legal aspects and that the Cobbold Commission and MA63 were not done properly. Supporters of PBK argued that there is nothing in the Federal Constitution that prevents Sabah and Sarawak from seeking an exit from the Federation of Malaysia by peaceful and legal means. ASPIRASI had a similar view with PBK but spearheaded the Sarawak Independence Referendum instead.

PH component parties in Sarawak – PKR, DAP and AMANAH – decided to unveil their own separate manifestos where they promoted a pro-Sarawak stance in order to restore Sarawak's status in accordance with MA63.

RESULTS AND VOTING PATTERNS

The EC targeted 70% of voters to cast their ballots in the election. As part of the effort to encourage voters to go out and fulfil their responsibilities on polling day, EC implemented the "Jom Kita Undi" campaign through various media channels (Ling, S. 2021). However, the percentage was much lower than expected with only 60.67% turnout. Table 2 shows the voting turnout in SSE21 in comparison to the election in 2011 and 2016 in each of the state constituency.

Table 2: Comparing voting percentages in the 2011, 2016 and 2021 state elections

Seat	Voting percentage		
	2011	2016	2021
Opar	73.5	76.4	69.6
Tasik Biru	69.9	75.1	64.1
Tanjung Datu	69.5	70.1	61.3
Pantai Damai	71.2	69.8	68.38
Demak Laut	70.1	71.4	67.7
Tupong	68.5	65.4	57.6
Samariang	67.6	67.9	61.7
Satok	64.4	65.0	59.29
Padungan	70.2	65.5	44.76
Pending	72.3	65.7	43.8
Batu Lintang	66.4	62.7	42.1
Kota Sentosa	75.4	67.9	48.2
Batu Kitang	NS	70.1	53.3
Batu Kawah	70.7	70.9	54.6
Asajaya	78.9	76.3	75.3
Muara Tuang	77.4	78.4	72.9
Stakan	NS	73.0	65.1
Serembu	NS	77.2	72.8
Mambong (formerly Bengoh)	67.5	68.2	59.4
Tarat	69.6	71.7	62.7
Tebedu	73.4	75.5	69.5
Kedup	69.4	77.1	74.3
Bukit Semuja	NS	70.7	59.9
Sadong Jaya	73.0	72.2	69.3
Simunjan	73.3	76.1	72.1
Gedong	NS	74.7	74.2
Sebuyau	74.4	73.2	68.2
Lingga	67.7	70.6	68.1
Beting Maro	73.8	76.7	67.7
Balai Ringin	74.4	78.4	80.3
Bukit Begunan	70.4	69.7	72.9
Simanggang	68.4	71.5	62.3
Engkelili	73.3	73.8	68.5

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Table 2: (continued)

Seat	Voting percentage		
	2011	2016	2021
Batang Ai	71.9	70.8	73.3
Saribas	75.8	79.8	73.1
Layar	73.7	72.4	63.2
Bukit Saban	75.2	74.0	78.5
Kalaka	72.0	71.6	68.8
Krian	78.9	77.3	63.1
Kabong	NS	72.2	71.5
Kuala Rejang (formerly Belawai)	70.2	74.4	67.0
Semop	66.6	65.8	66.6
Daro	72.0	67.5	63.4
Jemoreng	73.0	69.4	66.5
Repok	72.4	71.6	59.0
Meradong	73.0	73.5	65.8
Pakan	73.1	77.4	72.3
Meluan	70.0	69.8	64.4
Ngemah	66.1	71.9	71.5
Machan	69.3	70.4	67.1
Bukit Assek	68.8	66.6	49.3
Dudong	74.1	73.0	58.23
Bawang Assan	77.3	80.7	71.0
Pelawan	70.8	70.2	47.3
Nangka	72.3	67.8	63.0
Dalat	68.0	70.6	61.2
Tellian	NS	65.7	61.7
Balingian	70.2	69.7	66.5
Tamin	72.7	77.0	72.8
Kakus	68.5	74.0	71.3
Pelagus	65.4	64.9	65.3
Katibas	63.2	66.8	63.0
Bukit Goram	NS	58.7	52.5
Baleh	59.2	60.5	57.5
Belaga	69.8	65.9	63.7
Murum	NS	75.5	71.9
Jepak	69.4	67.9	63.0

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Table 2: (continued)

Seat	Voting percentage		
	2011	2016	2021
Tanjung Batu (formerly Kidurong)	67.3	69.2	51.4
Kemena	71.3	74.6	72.0
Samalaju	NS	68.1	63.7
Bekenu	66.9	69.7	64.5
Lambir	60.3	63.6	51.5
Piasau	63.1	64.6	48.1
Pujut	64.2	65.3	45.5
Senadin	66.1	65.9	50.4
Marudi	49.2	66.0	67.6
Telang Usan	57.2	63.9	57.2
Mulu	NS	62.3	58.5
Bukit Kota	65.4	UC	49.0
Batu Danau	68.5	68.3	61.8
Ba' Kelalan	65.9	70.9	58.8
Bukit Sari	70.8	UC	57

Note: NS – New seat, UC – Uncontested, NA – Not available

GPS Performance

GPS won 76 of the 82 seats contested, which is more than 90% of the seats in the SLA. DAP and PSB had to settle with four and two seats respectively. With this big win, GPS can be expected to continue to be a kingmaker when it comes to forming the next federal government in future general elections. GPS's election debut as a coalition was a resounding success, showing that it was more than a match for the opposition.

GPS's victory was evident in most of the seats it contested particularly in the Malay/Melanau, Iban, Bidayuh and Orang Ulu constituencies. In the Malay/Melanau-majority areas, GPS won all the contested seats. In terms of popular votes, GPS obtained more than 60%, indicating the opposition's lack of popularity among the Malay/Melanau electorate (Table 3). Anwar's presence in Beting Maro during campaigning was evidently not strong enough to help swing the support of the Malay/Melanau voters to the opposition. GPS's big win in the Malay/Melanau constituencies also showed that the message of development and stability brought by the ruling coalition resonated well among the Malay/Melanau voters who have been long known as staunch supporters of PBB.

Table 3: Majority and popular votes in the 2011, 2016 and 2021 state elections in the Malay/Melanau constituencies

Seat	Party won	Majority			Popular votes (%)		
		2011	2016	2021	2011	2016	2021
Tanjong Datu	GPS (PBB)	3,216	5,892	4,502	77.61	93.15	79.39
Pantai Damai	GPS (PBB)	5,071	9,260	8,381	75.08	86.82	82.19
Demak Laut	GPS (PBB)	3,752	7,382	6,399	75.73	88.07	78.25
Tupong	GPS (PBB)	4,551	8,055	11,209	68.87	79.12	85.25
Semariang	GPS (PBB)	5,431	7,760	10,283	75.65	80.16	87.61
Satok	GPS (PBB)	2,800	5,045	6,003	71.27	79.12	83.58
Asajaya	GPS (PBB)	4,489	4,087	4,531	70.97	74.72	70.04
Muara Tuang	GPS (PBB)	6,327	8,578	6,237	77.55	81.61	63.63
Sadong Jaya	GPS (PBB)	2,934	3,467	3,877	82.22	82.96	82.96
Simunjan	GPS (PBB)	4,048	2,712	3,351	71.14	73.02	73.02
Gedong	GPS (PBB)	NS	3,365	3,607	78.77	81.88	81.88
Sebuyau	GPS (PBB)	2,276	2,742	4,134	69.88	79.30	79.30
Lingga	GPS (PBB)	2,506	2,943	2,273	66.84	58.10	58.10
Beting Maro	GPS (PBB)	391	1,707	1,711	60.14	51.62	51.62
Saribas	GPS (PBB)	1,728	4,432	3,236	64.40	79.57	65.52
Kalaka	GPS (PBB)	5,170	2,835	2,868	68.27	77.57	72.43
Kabong	GPS (PBB)	NS	3,585	2,763	0.00	77.35	94.12
Kuala Rajang	GPS (PBB)	4,546	5,586	3,325	87.30	88.60	70.35
Semop	GPS (PBB)	4,250	4,412	3,158	83.04	85.77	64.58
Daro	GPS (PBB)	3,197	4,432	5,112	75.22	89.78	93.18
Jemoreng	GPS (PBB)	2,926	3,789	5,012	73.12	77.43	86.80
Dalat	GPS (PBB)	4,990	6,330	6,625	80.17	90.14	93.90
Tellian	GPS (PBB)	NS	4,421	2,917	0.00	88.42	70.10
Balingian	GPS (PBB)	5,154	2,964	2,904	76.32	77.18	71.13
Jepak	GPS (PBB)	3,128	4,201	4,243	62.08	68.82	69.44
Bukit Kota	GPS (PBB)	5,061	UC	4,986	73.02	0.00	78.78
Bukit Sari	GPS (PBB)	5,063	UC	5,636	86.30	0.00	87.48

Note: NS – New seat, UC – Uncontested

A similar trend can be seen in the Iban-majority constituencies. GPS won all but one seat in Engkilili, which went to PSB. However, the popular support for GPS showed a downward trend compared with the results of SSE16 (Table 4). There were six areas where popular votes obtained by GPS candidates were less than 50% – Simanggang, Engkilili, Batang Ai, Krian, Pakan and Ngemah. The results showed that PSB’s presence in the Iban areas was instrumental in breaking GPS’s otherwise sweeping dominance, particularly in constituencies under PRS’s control.

Table 4: Majority and popular votes in the 2011, 2016 and 2021 state elections in the Iban constituencies

Seat	Party won	Majority			Popular votes (%)		
		2011	2016	2021	2011	2016	2021
Balai Ringin	GPS (PRS)	2,885	2,039	1,285	64.63	58.10	56.38
Bukit Begunan	GPS (PRS)	2,773	4,695	1,420	68.04	86.65	58.69
Simanggang	GPS (SUPP)	2,447	1,388	175	67.31	50.70	48.94
Engkilili	PSB	3,807	1,388	1,191	71.88	70.75	43.48
Batang Ai	GPS (PRS)	2,741	3,186	738	72.18	74.20	44.59
Layar	GPS (PBB)	1,916	1,428	2,039	63.37	61.56	67.75
Bukit Saban	GPS (PBB)	2,774	4,599	3,988	68.83	85.66	77.94
Krian	GPS (PDP)	2,090	1,640	932	60.16	58.98	43.67
Pakan	GPS (PBB)	1,197	426	714	58.96	50.90	41.13
Meluan	GPS (PDP)	1,642	677	822	58.42	37.40	53.21
Ngemah	GPS (PRS)	995	154	261	45.00	46.13	46.23
Machan	GPS (PBB)	1,629	2,952	2,089	54.39	60.43	53.66
Tamin	GPS (PRS)	1,292	2,085	3,588	57.42	54.99	64.99
Kakus	GPS (PRS)	602	5,211	1,897	52.13	75.21	52.35
Pelagus	GPS (PRS)	2,827	3,284	1,049	58.49	82.26	56.29
Katibas	GPS (PBB)	2,256	3,053	2,997	62.84	74.20	64.62
Bukit Goram	GPS (PBB)	NS	2,586	3,538	0.00	69.57	68.45
Baleh	GPS (PRS)	3,898	4,843	1,909	79.59	91.67	61.85
Kemena	GPS (PBB)	3,349	4,868	3,611	64.52	75.58	62.82
Samalaju	GPS (PRS)	NS	2,464	6,043	0.00	61.34	67.05
Marudi	GPS (PDP)	3,202	1,387	5,976	72.95	56.89	74.53
Bukit Danau	GPS (PBB)	2,319	2,939	706	71.13	75.37	53.14

Note: NS – New seat

As expected, the Bidayuh returned their support to GPS. The ruling coalition won all the Bidayuh-majority seats, consolidating its popular support among the Bidayuh electorate. Similar to the Malay/Melanau areas, GPS won more than half of the popular votes in the Bidayuh constituencies except in Opar (46.77%) (Table 5).

Table 5: Majority and popular votes in the 2011, 2016 and 2021 state elections in the Bidayuh constituencies

Seats	Party won	Majority			Popular votes (%)		
		2011	2016	2021	2011	2016	2021
Opar	GPS (SUPP)	2,006	2,084	1,689	57.31	50.06	46.77
Tasik Biru	GPS (PDP)	2,072	1,288	4,212	55.99	55.13	53.71
Serembu	GPS (PBB)	NS	1,397	1,650	50.43	57.69	57.69
Mambong	GPS (PBB)	3,646	3,333	3,071	52.96	52.00	52.00
Tarat	GPS (PBB)	1,995	5,421	5,008	73.61	60.25	60.25
Tebedu	GPS (PBB)	4,066	6,193	3,273	86.34	61.82	61.82
Kedup	GPS (PBB)	2,265	3,828	3,071	73.23	63.34	63.34

In areas where the Chinese voters were dominant, there was a significant swing back to the ruling coalition. Five of the Chinese constituencies that were under the opposition before were recaptured by GPS – Kota Sentosa, Bukit Assek, Pelawan, Tanjong Batu and Pujut. Despite winning in Padungan and Pending, popular votes obtained by the opposition were less than 50%, signifying an increase in popular support to GPS (Table 6). Various factors contributed to the drop in the popular support from the Chinese voters to the opposition such as low voting turnout and their unhappiness towards DAP’s inability to deliver after winning GE14 (Puyok 2021b, 11). As Puyok (2021b, 11) observes:

The opposition’s dismal performance was mainly attributed to its inability to appear as a strong and united force. DAP’s “Change” and “Sarawak Forward” slogans had lost their appeal among the electorate. Clearly, the Chinese voters in urban areas were disenchanted with the opposition’s failure in proving that it could govern better than GPS. The increase in Chinese support for GPS shows that they are willing to give it a chance to lead the state.

Table 6: Majority and popular votes in the 2011, 2016 and 2021 state elections in the Chinese constituencies

Seats	Party won	Majority			Popular votes (%)		
		2011	2016	2021	2011	2016	2021
Padungan	DAP	7,884	4,270	1,198	72.60	64.31	37.52
Pending	DAP	7,595	5,012	540	67.95	62.60	40.29
Batu Lintang	PSB	8,381	4,385	93	72.01	61.61	35.86
Kota Sentosa	GPS (SUPP)	4,824	2,819	1,683	61.84	58.16	43.05
Batu Kitang	GPS (SUPP)	NS	1,840	4,163	0.00	53.48	57.66
Batu Kawah	GPS (SUPP)	543	2,085	5,393	51.89	54.12	70.20
Repok	GPS (SUPP)	2,679	943	7,308	60.21	51.96	73.15
Meradong	GPS (SUPP)	2,687	1,516	3,362	62.12	56.21	58.24
Bukit Assek	GPS (SUPP)	8,827	4,497	874	73.49	61.05	34.94
Dudong	GPS (PDP)	317	2,146	5,806	50.37	46.36	46.99
Bawang Assan	PSB	1,808	4,131	913	57.05	61.62	43.25
Pelawan	GPS (SUPP)	6,391	4,314	100	65.78	58.30	27.70
Tanjong Batu	GPS (PBB)	6,930	2,548	23	69.19	59.10	35.38
Piasau	GPS (SUPP)	1,590	2,112	4,988	57.64	57.83	66.61
Pujut	GPS (SUPP)	3,849	1,759	1,566	63.86	52.57	44.86

Note: NS – New seat

The opposition could not match GPS in the Orang Ulu-majority constituencies as well, with GPS winning all but one seat that returned to Baru Bian, the former Sarawak PKR leader. The Orang Ulu comprise Sarawak's minority ethnic groups such as the Lun Bawang, Kelabit, Kenyah, Kayan, Penan and other smaller ethnic groups living in the interior areas. Except for a majority of the Lun Bawang in Ba' Kelalan who have consistently elected an opposition representative in the SLA since 2011, most of the Orang Ulu electorate have been GPS's traditional supporters. GPS won more than half of the popular votes in the Orang Ulu areas – Belaga, Murum, Telang Usan and Mulu (Table 7). Meanwhile, Baru Bian retained the Ba' Kelalan seat, gaining 54.66% of the popular votes.

Table 7: Majority and popular votes in the 2011, 2016 and 2021 state elections in the Orang Ulu constituencies

Seats	Party won	Majority			Popular votes (%)		
		2011	2016	2021	2011	2016	2021
Belaga	GPS (PRS)	2,928	3,686	2,245	68.06	89.96	70.52
Murum	GPS (PRS)	NS	2,200	2,919	0.00	54.00	66.23
Telang Usan	GPS (PBB)	845	167	2,422	46.85	56.89	74.53
Mulu	GPS (PBB)	NS	1,708	2,875	0.00	51.33	59.76
Ba' Kelalan	PSB	473	538	680	55.21	55.20	54.66

Note: NS – New seat

In the mixed areas where none of the ethnic groups form more than 50% of the total population, GPS stood out as a party of choice by the voters, obtaining more than 60% of the popular votes (Table 8). In Nangka, a seat under the Sibiu constituency in the north of Sarawak, GPS's popular votes were as high as 84.09% (Table 8).

Table 8: Majority and popular votes in the 2011, 2016 and 2021 state elections in mixed constituencies

Seats	Party won	Majority			Popular votes (%)		
		2011	2016	2021	2011	2016	2021
Stakan	GPS (PBB)	NS	7,042	5,807	0.00	83.22	72.45
Bukit Semuja	GPS (PBB)	NS	3,144	4,705	0.00	59.64	70.06
Nangka	GPS (PBB)	5,302	7,617	10,804	76.20	77.62	84.09
Bekenu	GPS (PBB)	3,714	4,789	5,397	70.34	71.68	79.58
Lambir	GPS (PBB)	1,521	4,907	5,562	54.92	68.66	68.02
Senadin	GPS (SUPP)	58	3,538	7,591	50.20	58.84	62.30

Note: NS – New seat

GPS's performance in the constituencies under the six parliamentary seats that it lost to PH in 2018 was neither commendable nor satisfactory. Despite winning in all the state seats under the opposition-controlled parliamentary areas, popular support garnered by the ruling coalition was less than 50% in Krian, Pakan, Batang Ai and Opar. This means that even with GPS's incumbency advantage, it could not sway the support of the opposition supporters in the four Dayak-majority constituencies (Table 9).

Table 9: Comparing the popular votes in the state constituencies in the six parliamentary seats

Seat/Popular vote in 2018 (GE14)	Majority			Popular votes		
	2011	2016	2021	2011	2016	2021
Mas Gading (56.7%)						
Opar	2,006	2,084	1,689	56.6	49.4 (-)	45.98
Tasik Biru	2,072	1,288	4,212	55.3	50.4 (-)	52.70
Puncak Borneo (54.6%)						
Serembu	NS	1,397	1,650	NS	49.3	56.86
Mambong (formerly Bengoh)	3,646	3,333	3,071	54.9	51.8 (-)	51.08
Lubok Antu (40.9%)						
Engkelili	3,807	1,388	1,191	71.1	69.9 (-)	42.92
Batang Ai	2,741	3,186	738	71.2	72.7 (+)	44.08
Saratok (52.18%)						
Kalaka	5,170	5,170	2,868	64.7	76.0 (+)	70.30
Krian	2,090	2,090	932	59.6	58.3 (-)	43.01
Kabong	NS	NS	2,763	NS	75.6	66.20
Julau (55.28%)						
Pakan	1,197	426	714	58.2	50.3 (-)	40.55
Meluan	1,642	677	822	57.5	36.8 (+)	52.51
Selangau (51.11%)						
Tamin	1,292	2,085	3,588	56.2	54.1 (-)	64.05
Kakus	602	5,211	1,897	51.2	73.6 (+)	51.62

Note: NS – New seat. The minus sign (-) denotes a decrease in popular vote, while the plus sign (+) signifies an increase in popular vote.

Thus, what accounts for PH’s inability to maintain the support of its traditional supporters, particularly in the Chinese areas? And why did it fail to repeat its electoral performance as in previous elections? The Chinese voters were reportedly angry at DAP for their inadequate performance during PH’s 22 months in government. Even before the polls, there were undercurrents that the party would lose its seats. The Chinese voters were against the opposition coalition which failed to perform satisfactorily and accused PH leaders of breaking their promises. The Chinese voters were also disappointed that DAP could not foster a deal with PSB, resulting in a split in the opposition votes (Bedi 2015). Some deserted DAP after the remarks made by former finance minister, Lim Guan Eng, that Sarawak would go bankrupt in three years.

DAP's defeats in its strongholds of Kota Sentosa, Pujut, Pelawan and Bukit Assek showed that the party had lost its grip over the Chinese. Unlike in previous elections, component parties under PH had decided to contest using their own party symbols. The perception of most people was that the failure of the opposition parties to form a united front was a clear indication that there was an internal rift among them, affecting their chances of taking over from GPS.

PKR was completely wiped out. In SSE16, DAP won seven seats and PKR three. In SSE21, DAP only won two of the 24 seats contested while PKR lost all 28 seats. AMANAH, which contested eight seats, also failed to win a single seat. The loss of DAP, PKR and AMANAH suggested that Sarawakians prefer local-based parties such as GPS and PSB over national-based ones.

Similar to the past elections, support for GPS in the Malay/Melanau-majority constituencies remained high. Sarawak BN's rebranding to GPS was not an issue as the former BN loyal supporters shifted their support to GPS. However, the support for GPS in the Dayak-majority constituencies was weakened by PSB, which managed to split the votes. For instance, there were five Dayak seats where GPS candidates won with less than 50% of the total votes (Table 10). Local parties such as PBK, ASPIRASI, PBDSB and SEDAR failed to make a splash and suffered crushing defeats as they returned empty handed.

The opposition was also affected by the low voting turnout particularly in the urban areas (Table 11). Voters apparently saw no real reason to vote as the parties contesting against GPS were not viewed as viable alternatives. Furthermore, the expectations were higher among the urban voters who had no qualms about changing their representatives whom they had supported previously. They were ready to teach political parties a lesson as they did not want business as usual but fairness, consistency and accountability.

Many argue that DAP supporters "boycotted" the election, paving the way for GPS to recapture some of its traditional seats from DAP. For SUPP leaders, the swing in Chinese support from DAP to GPS was an indication that the urban voters were now back with the government (Welsh 2018).

In the eyes of most voters, the election was just to formalise the ruling coalition's legitimacy to administer Sarawak for the next five years. They did not see that there were worthwhile alternatives to replace the current government. Clearly, there was less competition and heated exchanges among the candidates this time. In fact, the government and opposition were frequently reminded of the "ceasefire"

understanding that they had signed, making the election less provocative and campaigning to be conducted in a collegial manner.

Table 10: Seats with less than 50% popular votes in SSE21

Seat	Voting percentage	Majority	Popular votes (%)
Kota Sentosa	48.2	1,683	42.39
Simanggang	62.3	175	48.02
Batang Ai	73.3	738	44.08
Krian	63.1	932	43.01
Pakan	72.3	714	40.55
Ngemah	71.5	261	45.32
Bukit Assek	49.3	874	34.39
Dudong	58.23	5,806	46.13
Pelawan	47.3	100	27.07
Tanjung Batu (Kidurong)	51.4	23	35.02
Pujut	45.5	1,566	44.30

Table 11: Seats with reduced turnout in 2021 compared to previous elections

Seats	Voting percentage		
	2011	2016	2021
Padungan	70.2	65.5 (-)	44.76
Pending	72.3	65.7 (-)	43.8
Batu Lintang	66.4	62.7(-)	42.1
Kota Sentosa	75.4	67.9 (-)	48.2
Bukit Assek	68.8	66.6 (-)	49.3
Pelawan	70.8	70.2 (-)	47.3
Piasau	63.1	64.6 (+)	48.1
Pujut	64.2	65.3 (-)	45.5
Senadin	66.1	65.9 (-)	50.4
Bukit Kota	65.4	UC	49.0

Note: UC – Uncontested. The minus sign (-) denotes a decrease in popular vote, while the plus sign (+) signifies an increase in popular vote.

The COVID-19 pandemic had also affected the outcomes of the election. Some voters, particularly the elderly, were afraid to go out and vote. Those who lived outside of their constituencies did not return to vote as well. Strict SOPs made it difficult for parties and candidates to campaign, making the election this time less lively and celebratory. Traditionally, campaigning in Sarawak required the candidates to move from one long house to another; they usually held talks and small gatherings in the villages where physical contacts were inevitable.

While GPS was expected to win the election, issues such as the popularity of the “Sarawak First” sentiment propounded by the ruling coalition, low voting turnout, and lackadaisical campaigning due to the COVID-19 pandemic were among the key factors leading to the opposition’s failure. According to one opinion, “[the election] was not really an election [as] GPS had an overall advantage” (Hassan 2021). In addition, patronage politics is still very much alive and has its fair share in contributing to GPS’s overall victory. As Sarawak is made up of small villages controlled by government-aligned chiefs, it is easier for the ruling party to mobilise and to garner support.

PROSPECTS FOR SARAWAK POLITICS

The election results did not represent a departure from the previous electoral patterns in Sarawak. Indeed, GPS’s victory was not unexpected. The support for GPS in the rural areas especially among the Malay Muslim and Dayak voters remained intact. GPS also managed to win back a few urban seats – albeit marginally – as the voting turnout in those seats was very much reduced compared to the past elections.

It can be argued that the election results confirmed GPS’s popularity irrespective of the name change from BN to GPS. In 2016, Sarawak BN’s big win was mainly due to the “Tok Nan” factor (Weiss and Puyok 2017). The strategy to focus on Adenan worked very well as Sarawakians were looking for a fresh leadership after the end of Taib Mahmud’s reign as chief minister (Weiss and Puyok 2017). In SSE21, the highlight of GPS’s campaign was not only on the coalition’s ability to bring about political stability but on Abang Jo’s achievements in implementing MA63 (Puyok 2021c, 11). Sarawakians seem to want the status quo to remain and the incumbents to return to power. Undeniably, the election was important for Abang Jo as he needed his own personal mandate from the voters. One political analyst was quoted as saying: “Abang Jo is leading GPS, which is a new political entity. It is very important for him to enhance his reputation and for political legitimacy” (Bedi 2021).

GPS's big win has increased the state government's bargaining power when negotiating with the federal government about Sarawak's rights. With the stronger mandate, Sarawakians expect the state leadership to be more effective in negotiating issues related to MA63 and also to implement the development plan as promised by Abang Jo. Apparently, the Sarawak for Sarawakian sentiments which were set in motion by all parties during the campaigning period had benefitted GPS as well. However, none could match GPS's success in arousing the Sarawak for Sarawakian sentiments through the slogan "Sarawak First" which resonated well among many Sarawakians. It was also through GPS that Sarawak scored many firsts compared to Sabah in its effort to fulfil MA63. The landmark constitutional amendment to recognise Sarawak and Sabah as "Borneo States" was done through GPS under the leadership of Abang Jo (Puyok 2021c, 11).

Despite GPS's major success, it is erroneous to assume that the wind of change that caused the shift in 2018, particularly in the Dayak-majority constituencies, had stopped blowing. The support for the opposition in the Dayak areas was still intact except that it was not strong enough to weaken GPS. GPS's component party PRS is expected to be challenged by PSB in the Dayak areas in the coming elections.

CONCLUSION

SSE21 was important for at least three reasons. First, it was a litmus test for Abang Jo and the newly rebranded GPS. Abang Jo needed a strong mandate to execute his development plan for Sarawak and also to negotiate about Sarawak rights with the federal government. With a stronger mandate, the people of Sarawak expect Abang Jo and his government to implement various development policies that he had promised and announced earlier. Second, SSE21 provided the opportunity for GPS to regain the confidence of the people who deserted the ruling coalition in GE14 when it lost five parliamentary seats to PH. However, the percentage of popular votes garnered by GPS especially in the Dayak constituencies was slightly lower compared to other areas, indicating that the opposition's influence among the Dayak voters was still intact. Hence, the coming state elections will pose a great challenge for GPS, particularly its component, PRS, which represents the large bulk of the Dayak (Iban) support in the coalition. Third, as the election was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, it forced parties and candidates to rethink their campaigning strategies, particularly in rural areas where "personal touch" was inevitable. As it turned out, the COVID-19 SOPs were disadvantageous to the opposition as it prevented its new candidates from moving from one place to another freely. However, the SOPs posed fewer problems to GPS as most of its candidates were already known among the ruling coalition loyal supporters.

Incumbency advantage, low voting turnout, and disenchantment among some segment of voters towards the opposition were among the key factors contributing to GPS's decisive win. Support for GPS was also growing due to the feel-good factor created by the ruling coalition through the successful promotion of the Sarawak First sentiment and the fulfilment of the MA63 through a constitutional amendment to the federal constitution and the decentralisation of federal authorities to Sarawak.

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NOTES

1. The six parliamentary seats were Selangau, Saratok, Julau, Lubok Antu, Puncak Borneo and Mas Gading.
2. S4S or Sarawak for Sarawakian Movement is a Sarawak-based NGO which advocates for the protection of Sarawak's rights and Sarawak's independence through the Sarawak Independence Referendum Ordinance.
3. SIA is a loose grouping mainly operating in Sarawak which seeks to create awareness among Sarawakians about Sarawak's history and rights as an independent entity.
4. Section 2 of the Sarawak Land Code defines a native territorial domain as an area or territory within, adjoining, or immediately adjacent to an area where native customary rights have been created by that community pursuant to Section 5.

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