

## **PAKATAN HARAPAN'S PERFORMANCE IN THE 2021 SARAWAK STATE ELECTION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article aims to examine the performance of Pakatan Harapan (PH) in the 2021 Sarawak State Election (SSE21). It explains the three main reasons for PH's dismal showing. First, local-based political parties took advantage of structural weaknesses in Sarawak PH and managed to convince Sarawakians that state rights could only be protected by political entities controlled by Sarawak leaders. Second, the "Sarawak First" sentiment changed the political landscape of Sarawak and increased the sense of solidarity among Sarawakians. It was the driving force behind the campaign messages of the local-based political parties that resonated well among the majority of the Sarawakian voters. Third, the three PH coalition parties in Sarawak, namely Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH) did not have a common political ideology to bind them together, strengthening the common belief that DAP, PKR and AMANAH came together simply out of convenience to gain power. In order to survive in Sarawak, PH needs to rebuild its image and political strategies relevant to the needs of the Sarawakians voters. This article is based on data from online media sources and observations made during the election on 18 December 2021.*

**Keywords:** Sarawak State Election, Pakatan Harapan, Gabungan Parti Sarawak, coalition parties, opposition parties

## **INTRODUCTION**

The 2021 Sarawak State Election (SSE21) which was held on 18 December 2021 marked a significant event for all Sarawakians. The long-overdue state election was a much-awaited event for Sarawakians after it was suspended due to the nationwide emergency to curb the spread of COVID-19. The emergency, which was in effect from 12 January 2021 to 1 August 2021 nationwide, was only lifted on 3 November 2021 for Sarawak after the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Al-Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatuddin Al-Mustafa Billah Shah revoked the order. It meant that the Sarawak State Legislative Assembly (SLA) was shelved for about six months after being dissolved automatically on 7 June 2021.

The SSE21 witnessed Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) winning a landslide in the election, sweeping 76 out of the 84 seats in the SLA compared to 67 out of the 82 seats during the previous state election. With the resounding election result, GPS has yet again succeeded in securing a supermajority over the SLA, a result that the coalition has achieved for over three decades. The heat was high as all parties started gearing up for the much-awaited state-wide poll. The SSE21 saw 82 seats for grabs to elect the new 19th SLA members. The state election saw an increase of 120 contesting candidates (about 52% increase), compared to only 229 candidates in the 2016 Sarawak State Election (SSE16) resulting in a whopping 349 candidates vying for the 82 seats of the SLA.

There was intense contest throughout the state, as the electoral contest revealed growing regional parties in coalitions in Sarawak. Out of 10 contesting parties or coalitions, only two were national-based. Pakatan Harapan (PH) contested 62 seats, while Perikatan Nasional (PN) contested one seat. The four largest parties contesting were GPS, contesting in all 82 seats; Parti Sarawak Bersatu (PSB) contesting in 70 seats; PH contesting in 62 seats; and Parti Bumi Kenyalang (PBK) contesting in 73 seats. Clearly, the regional approach was the central theme for the election as all local-based parties each brought forward their own definition of Sarawak regionalism (Weiss and Puyok 2017). With a growing sense of regional autonomy permeating the electoral contest, PH seemed to lag compared to the rest of the competing parties. It was believed that Sarawakians would rather support a Sarawak-based party than a national-based one, as regional identity politics started to catch the attention of Sarawakians.

The state-based coalition proved to be too strong for its opposition. The SSE21 saw the national-based opposition coalition of Sarawak, PH—previously the most prominent opposition in the state—suffer a painful defeat. The coalition won only two seats in the state-wide poll through its component party, Democratic Action

Party (DAP). The PH defeat in the SSE21 saw the emergence of a new imposing coalition, PSB, as a new opposition in the state. The national-based coalition, PH, was defeated in SSE21, which was a glaring indication of its declining election performance in Sarawak. Despite its astounding performance in the Malaysian 14th General Election (GE14) in 2018, PH has slowly lost its appeal among Sarawakians. Focusing on the national coalition-based opposition party, widely regarded as a “peninsular-based party”, this article aims to provide an analysis of the PH coalition’s performance in the SSE21. To evaluate PH’s performance in the SSE21, data were collected from a range of online media outlets active during that period as well as from other secondary sources available. These sources offered a plethora of perspectives, insights, and factual accounts about the performance of various political parties. Consequently, this diversity of information facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the political dynamics at play.

## **PH: QUEST FOR A STRONG COALITION**

Since the 1970s, the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN), has always been able to maintain its two-thirds majority. However, starting from the late 1990s, BN started to experience a gradual loss of power. The opposition began to gain more seats in Parliament as the newly formed Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) established a united coalition, Barisan Alternatif (BA) with the other major opposition parties such as Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), DAP and Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM) to counter the weakening power of the BN. The attempt by the opposition to form a coalition was tested when its internal ideological disagreement continued to cause friction within the coalition. The culmination of the internal ideological conflict was DAP leaving BA in 2001.

In the March 2008 General Election, a new political scenario emerged in Malaysia with the unprecedented denial of the two-thirds parliamentary majority of the BN and its loss of power in five states: Pulau Pinang, Perak, Selangor, Kedah and Kelantan. The evolving political landscape precipitated the formation of Pakatan Rakyat (PR), an alliance consisting of three opposition parties: DAP, PAS, and PKR. This alliance was critical for securing governing majorities in the legislatures of four states: Kedah, Pulau Pinang, Perak and Selangor.

In the May 2013 General Election, the aim of defeating BN was almost achieved when PR won 52% of the popular votes. However, despite the coalition’s primary aim to break down BN, the inherent clash of ideological differences (Wan Saiful 2020) within the coalition continued to deprave the unity of the alliance. Failure to

deal with various internal and external challenges faced by PR led to the breakdown of the coalition in June 2015.

Nonetheless, the configuration of political cooperation among the opposition was still deemed necessary in order to unseat BN in GE14. Besides, Malaysian political developments in 2015, with the imprisonment of the charismatic Anwar Ibrahim, the return of Tun Mahathir to Malaysia's political scene, and the start of Najib's downfall in popularity due to issues surrounding his administration (Muhamad Nadzri 2018), have necessitated an establishment of a more robust opposition coalition.

As a result, PH was founded on 22 September 2015 as a platform for the coalition of opposition parties in Malaysia and a replacement for PR (Nur Atika 2018). Compared to PR, the newly established PH consisted of more diverse opposition parties than the previous coalition. The PH coalition consisted of DAP, PKR, Parti Amanah Negara (a PAS splinter party, AMANAH), and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (an UMNO splinter party, BERSATU). The four parties in PH had very different ideologies, especially when it came to issues of race and religion. The more fundamental differences were never reconciled despite taking various steps to create a coalition agreement (Wan Saiful 2020).

## **GE14: A JUNCTURE FOR PH**

In the GE14 history was made as the opposition finally seized Putrajaya for the first time. The results of the general election were a real eye-opener as BN was ousted, getting by with only 79 seats out of 222 parliamentary seats. PH won 113 seats, allowing them to form a government with simple majority (Wan Saiful 2020). On top of this, BN's popular vote had dropped by 10.96% to 36.42%—a stark contrast from its 47.38% in the previous general election (Muhamad Nadzri 2018). The results shocked all as the PH coalition, in retrospect, was seen as weaker than PR (Nur Atika 2018) and deemed too weak to win elections (Ufen 2020).

The GE14 results also stunned Sarawak BN as Sarawak has always been known as BN's "fixed deposit" in every election (Chin 2015). The opposition won 12 out of 31 parliamentary seats in Sarawak (10 from PH and two from independents), which was the biggest win for the Sarawak PH. Out of the 10 seats won, six were Chinese majority seats (five seats won by DAP and one by PKR), and the rest were Dayak majority seats (one seat won by DAP and three by PKR). It showed dependence from both DAP and PKR regarding Chinese and Dayak votes to ensure Sarawak PH winnings. Many would argue that the main factors in PH's victory were the

1MDB scandal, anti-Najib, anti-UMNO sentiments, and Mahathir's ability to penetrate rural Malay constituencies to win the UMNO/PAS vote columns (Chin 2018). Despite the national factors that supposedly played important roles in PH's victory, the main motivation that affected the GE14 result in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak was primarily influenced by local considerations (Ostwald and Oliver 2020) and state nationalism (Chin 2018).

The aftermath of the GE14 saw Sarawak-based BN quit the national coalition and form a Sarawak-based political alliance named GPS. The coalition was formed on 12 June 2018, consisting of all four component parties of the previous Sarawak BN—Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Sarawak United Peoples' Party (SUPP), Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS), and Progressive Democratic Party (PDP). Some might agree that GPS was formed mostly upon the realisation that there was a need for the previously affiliated Sarawak-based BN to distance itself from the salient issues that continued to cause concerns and political complications among the peninsular political parties. Furthermore, the growing attention of the Sarawak public on the issues of state nationalism, regional sentiments, and Sarawak's local economic and development issues strengthened the decision to form a Sarawak-owned political coalition.

### **IRRECONCILABLE ISSUES: THORN IN THE FLESH OF THE SARAWAK PH**

Despite encountering internal leadership tussles and fundamental ideological differences, the newly established PH government did have good conditions to succeed. PH had a good start when they first took the helm of Putrajaya. With general discontent towards the old regime, the existence of a strong leader, access to the spoils of office, and an opposition that was beginning to collapse (Ufen 2021), the prospect for PH was higher than ever. However, the PH victory was short-lived despite these favourable conditions.

The PH government collapsed in February 2020 after less than two years in power—destabilised by internal divisions within the coalition itself (Welsh 2020) due to its failure to create cohesion among party elites, gain command over the state apparatus, and establish common ground across a divided social structure (Case 2019). This incoherent support base had left the coalition vulnerable to attacks on identity issues (Ostwald 2020). The irreconcilable ideologies related to identity issues, specifically on issues related to race and religion, continued to be the thorn in the flesh for PH. In the case of the Sarawak PH, the unsolved issues permeating the PH coalition on the national level also affected the performance of all its national-based parties in Sarawak (PKR, DAP and AMANAH).

In the SSE21, the four former Sarawak-based BN component parties won 76 of the 82 seats in the SLA, with PBB and PRS winning every seat they ran for. On the other hand, PH faced a dismal failure when out of 62 seats contested, its component party, DAP, only won 2 out of 24 seats, while PKR and AMANAH lost in all contested seats. The two seats won by DAP, i.e., Padungan and Pending, were well-known as DAP strongholds.

Padungan's seat in 2021 had Chong Chieng Jen standing for DAP for a second time after defeating Lily Yong from SUPP in 2001 when he won with a slim majority of 1,033 votes. Although he lost, he managed to get 7,369 votes. Votes-wise, Chong should be able to entice traditional Chinese voters to continue voting for DAP. However, despite the Padungan seat being considered a DAP safe seat and Chong's solid reputation as the Sarawak DAP Chief, support from the Padungan voters was on the decline. This was apparent when Chong only managed to win 4,686 votes, a considerable fall from DAP's performance in 2016 with 9,332 votes and in 2011 with 11,957 votes as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: DAP votes and their percentage in N09 Padungan

Year	Votes	Total valid votes	%
2021	4,686	9,376	50
2016	9,332	14,510	64
2011	11,957	16,469	73

Similarly, support from DAP's traditional Chinese voter base in Pending also experienced a decline. Beginning with 14,375 winning votes in 2011, it was down to 12,454 votes in 2016, and lastly, 5,188 votes in 2021, showing a continuous downward trend of base support for DAP Pending (Table 2).

Table 2: DAP votes and their percentage in N10 Pending

Year	Votes	Total valid votes	%
2021	5,188	12,876	40
2016	12,454	17,896	70
2011	14,375	21,155	68

Furthermore, PH's continued disharmony was evident in the recent state elections in Melaka and Johor. Despite being the dominant party within the PH alliance, PKR faced a challenging electoral setback in recent state elections. Specifically, PKR did not secure any seats in Malacca and managed to win only a single seat in Johor.

## **GPS STRENGTHENING ITS HOLD IN SARAWAK**

The SSE21 results can directly indicate the start of rejection among Sarawakians towards national-based political parties. These parties, often dubbed by locals as Malayan-based parties or *parti asal Malaya*, were often portrayed as subjects of their peninsular political masters and were therefore seen as a deterrent to defending Sarawak's interests. For many Sarawakians, the Sarawak regionalism political approach was the best approach in navigating federal-state relations. Besides, the growing awareness of Sarawak's increasing influence within the Malaysian political landscape lent credence to the rising awareness that regionalism was the preferred approach.

Abang Johari, the Chairman of GPS, highlighted the constraints faced by the component parties of GPS—PBB, SUPP, PRS and PDP during their time in BN. Their influence was limited as decisions were reached through consensus, often sidelining the Sarawak-based parties due to the majority held by the Malayan parties.

Following GE14, these constraints created an opening for the emergence of the GPS coalition as a dynamic, pragmatic and realistic political entity, outpacing Sarawak PH. Unburdened by the central party's influence from Peninsular Malaysia, and firmly rooted in Sarawak under local leadership, GPS was viewed as more capable of responding to the calls for regional autonomy. The influential roles of key leaders—specifically Abang Johari and the late Adenan Satem—also played a vital part in shaping both Malaysian and Sarawak politics. GPS's robust strategy of "Sarawak First", championed by Abang Johari and originating from Adenan Satem's populist approach towards "Sarawak regionalism", effectively established a strong political identity that deeply resonated with voters, thus significantly impacting election outcomes.

The Federal Constitution Amendment 2021 Bill, recognising the special status of Sabah and Sarawak at Malaysia's formation, was tabled by Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar. As Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Law and Parliament) and a member of PBB (a component party of GPS), his involvement underlined the local drive behind the amendment. The 2021 amendment was generally received more positively compared to the 2019 proposed bill to amend Article 1(2) presented by the then PH government. That proposed amendment in 2019 faced significant criticism in Sarawak, perceived as only superficially addressing the demands of Sabah and Sarawak rather than being a substantive change. As a result, Sarawakians perceived that PH had not fulfilled its commitments to respect Sarawak's autonomy,

which were expected based on the Malaysian Agreement 1963 (MA63). Both the Sarawak PH and the PH federal government were criticised for not listening to the demands of Sarawakians to align the constitutional amendment with the principles of the MA63.

## **THE RISE OF LOCAL OPPOSITION-BASED PARTIES**

Another factor that went against PH in Sarawak was the rise of local opposition-based parties like PSB and PBK. Both PSB and PBK were on track to becoming the biggest opposition parties in Sarawak on their electoral debut in SSE21 as their regional approach matched that of GPS. It was highly expected that Sarawakians would rather support Sarawak local-based parties than PH which was deemed as a coalition of Malayan-based parties with a presence in Sarawak (Anand 2021).

PSB, in particular, was viewed to be more likely than PH in becoming a formidable opposition party, owing to the failure of the PH federal coalition to fulfil its electoral promises. In addition, PH had an image problem—it was perceived as a squabbling coalition with a bad track record during its tenure in federal power (Onn and Zhang 2021). It also lost five seats to GPS. The Sarawak election results showed that the people were furious at DAP as the party did not do much for the state when it was in power (Goh 2021a).

The end of SSE21 saw PH struggle to assert its position in the presence of much more popular local-based parties like PSB and PBK. It was evident then that the Malayan-based parties were starting to lose their lustre in the eyes of Sarawakians when PH votes notably decreased in 2021 to 78,197 votes from 230,309 votes in 2016. The same fate was received by PAS when its vote counts drastically declined, from 13,210 votes in 2016 to only 2,058 votes in 2021 (Table 3). From the number, it was apparent that a large chunk of the Sarawakian votes that previously went to the national-based parties were now owned by PSB and other local-based parties.

Table 3: Number of votes received in SSE16 and SSE21

Coalition/party	SSE16 votes (%)	SSE21 votes (%)
BN (2016) GPS (2021)	466,953 (61.96)	457,233 (61.26)
PSB	–	139,515 (18.69)
PBK	–	40,763 (5.46)
PH	230,309 (30.16)	78,197 (10.48)
PAS	13,210 (1.75)	2,058 (0.28)



The SSE21 results showed in Figure 1 saw PSB successfully displacing DAP as a new major opposition party in Sarawak, winning four seats (Batu Lintang, Engkilili, Ba' Kelalan and Bawang Assan). DAP only managed to retain two seats in SSE21 compared to seven seats in 2016 and 12 seats in 2011.

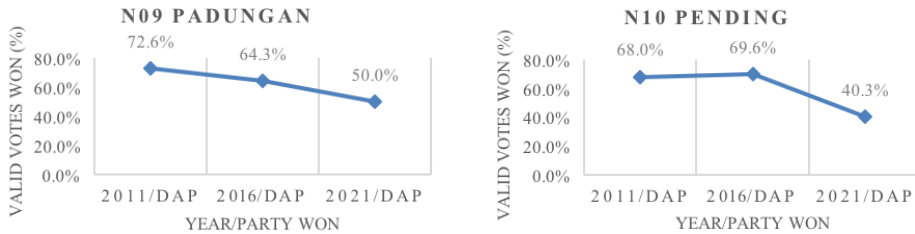


Figure 1: Sarawak PH's performance in the Sarawak State Elections in 2011, 2016 and 2021.

Despite receiving support from the Chinese community, DAP faced fierce competition not only from the local opposition parties but also from SUPP, which has started to receive increasing support from the urban Chinese. Comparing PH's performance in the last three state elections, it was apparent that the coalition has started to experience waning support as the percentage of the coalition's votes continued to decrease. Following GPS' landslide victory in Sarawak as well as astounding performance of the other local opposition parties, the SSE21 results demonstrated Sarawak's changing preference from nation-centric Malaysian-based opposition parties to state-centric local-based parties.

## **PH SARAWAK IN DISARRAY**

Other factors contributing to PH's loss in SSE21 include ideological incoherence among its Sarawak coalition parties: DAP, PKR and AMANAH. This lack of unity became evident when these parties opted to use their individual logos during the state election—a decision that reinforced existing perceptions that they had formed an alliance merely as a convenient strategy for power acquisition. Unlike its biggest rival GPS, PH as a coalition did not have a solid ideology, political framework, or moderation to bind them together (Goh 2021b). Conversely, GPS stood out for its coherent ideology and flexible political framework that resonated with the local populace. GPS demonstrated flexibility and responsiveness to local concerns—such as land rights, local governance, and indigenous issues—while PH's campaign was rigid and primarily directed by its peninsular office, limiting its ability to align with the unique needs of the Sarawak electorate. This difference

in approach was evident in how GPS managed to align its political aspirations with a broad cross-section of Sarawak society, whereas PH struggled to understand and address local preferences effectively.

Even during the GE14, Sarawak DAP chose to retain its logo to optimise its winning prospects in Sarawak, despite the party's decision to utilise the PKR's logo in the peninsula. Experts have argued that the distinct party logos of PKR and AMANAH might not necessarily boost their electoral appeal in Sarawak, especially among the Malay, Melanau and Muslim communities (Goh 2021b). This is likely because these parties are often viewed as peninsular-based entities with conservative political stances: PKR exhibits a Peninsular Malay mindset, while AMANAH leans towards a PAS-inspired approach, albeit in a more moderate form. On the other hand, DAP has successfully retained its strong appeal within the Chinese community, positioning itself as a competitive rival to the SUPP for the community's support (Goh 2021b).

Awang Azman et al. (2016) argued that leveraging ethnonationalism is the most effective political strategy for securing the support of Sarawak's diverse population. Unlike in Peninsular Malaysia, where ethnonationalism often serves to divide communities along ethnic lines, in Sarawak it functions as a unifying force. This distinct Sarawakian brand of ethnonationalism is referred to as "Sarawakisme", which serves as a platform to reject external political influences, especially from parties based in Peninsula Malaysia. This was evident during the SSE21 elections when GPS presented its manifesto in four languages, embracing 34 policy points under the inclusive slogan "Sarawak First". This approach aligns with Chin's (2018) observation that local factors and state nationalism played a significant role in the electoral outcomes in East Malaysian states like Sabah and Sarawak during the GE14.

In the latest Sarawak election, DAP suffered a significant setback due to growing voter dissatisfaction with the party's performance and that of the PH in the Federal Government. This disappointing outcome was partly attributed to low voter turnout among Chinese voters, a circumstance primarily exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic which impacted PH's campaign strategy during the election. Concurrently, a split in the urban vote added to the party's difficulties (Goh 2021c).

At a press conference held by Sarawak DAP on 29 December 2021, Chong Chieng Jen highlighted that in urban polling stations where Chinese voters constituted the majority, voter turnout was recorded at only 40% to 45%. This figure was considerably lower than the overall 60.67% voter turnout. This pattern of low voter

turnout among the Chinese electorate was observed across the state, a marked departure from the GE14 in 2018. During the GE14, turnout amongst Chinese voters exceeded 65% (Goh 2021c).

PH also missed many opportunities. Firstly, it failed to reform the electoral system to level the playing field for all political parties. They seemed to have little urgency on the matter, a major tactical error since the country had long been driven into districts overwhelmingly favourable to the BN coalition. Second, they missed the opportunity to build grassroots networks in rural and urban areas to show how they were making a difference in people's lives. The revival of local elections could have been a crucial campaign for PH to use as a basis for building long-term federal support. This was another issue that took a back seat during the PH period.

## **THE FUTURE OF PH IN SARAWAK**

Looking at the performance of PH during SSE21, where they only won two seats, the future of PH in Sarawak appears to be dim. However, PH managed to win seven seats in Sarawak during the Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15). The image of PH as a squabbling coalition with a bad track record over its 22 months in federal power (Onn and Zhang 2021) did not help to entice Sarawakian voters who prefer stability more than anything. Therefore, PH needs to resolve its internal conflicts and develop new strategies if it wants to gain the favour of Sarawak voters.

From a larger point of view, Malaysia's political parties and electoral outcomes would continue to determine PH's political standing within the Malaysian political map. The fact that states will benefit tremendously if they are politically aligned with the federal government cannot be ignored. This means that being on the side of the eventual winner in the contest for national leadership will have a significant impact on state-level manoeuvres (Yeoh 2020). Therefore, any opposition coalition parties wishing to compete in Sarawak must strive for a more robust strategy, with the inclusion of Sabah and Sarawak in national decision-making platforms viewed as critical from a political standpoint.

Any coalition administration must ensure that political representatives from these two states are awarded ministerial positions in the federal cabinet. Sabah and Sarawak have called for restoring 35% of the parliamentary seats to both states. In the meantime, after securing a significant victory in the Sarawak elections, GPS has continued to strengthen its position as a vital kingmaker in the GE15, which

took place on 19 November 2022. The momentum from GPS' historic success in the SSE21, during which it won 75 out of 82 seats in the SLA could be leveraged to expand its share of Sarawak's 31 parliamentary seats.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study aims to examine the performance of PH in SSE21. The analysis revealed several factors why Sarawakians did not favour PH.

First, with the rise of local opposition coalition parties, support for PH among Sarawak voters gradually declined. Second, the "Sarawak First" policy has changed the political landscape of Sarawak and the sense of solidarity between all ethnicities will continue to be the driving force behind regionalism. The SSE21 results can indicate the start of rejection among the local Sarawakians towards national-based political parties. Third, the three PH coalition parties in Sarawak (DAP, PKR and AMANAH) did not have a common political ideology to bind them together. The decision to use their respective party logos during the state election strengthened the common belief about PH, i.e., that its coalition parties came together simply out of convenience to gain power.

Following GPS' landslide victory in Sarawak as well as the astounding performance of the other local opposition parties, the SSE21 results demonstrated Sarawak's changing preference from Malayan-based opposition parties to local-based opposition parties. Consequently, any opposition coalition parties wishing to compete in Sarawak need to be more strategic and include Sabah and Sarawak in national decision-making platforms. As Sarawak is often referred to as a political kingmaker, given the larger Malaysian political landscape, future research should focus on issues of coalition politics.

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