

## **THE 2021 SARAWAK STATE ELECTION AND DAYAK POLITICS: DAYAKISM, DEVELOPMENT AND DIVISION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article analyses the performance of the candidates and political parties contesting in the Dayak-majority constituencies in the 2021 Sarawak State Election. It explains why, despite the promotion of Dayak issues by Parti Sarawak Bersatu (PSB) and Parti Bumi Kenyalang (PBK) and the presence of ethnonationalist parties such as the Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak Baru (PBDSB), the Dayak continued to support the ruling Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS). The article argues that the success of GPS in securing the Dayak support can be attributed to three reasons: first, GPS's ability in accentuating the "Sarawak First" sentiment among the Dayak; second, the ruling coalition's ability in dispensing tangible development and economic benefits to the Dayak; and third, the political division among the Dayak which weakened their representation and influence outside of GPS. In the larger scheme of things, even though the theory of ethnic party competition can be used to explain the growth and survival of ethnic-based parties and ethnic politics in West Malaysia, it is only partially applicable in Sarawak, as the dynamics of the Dayak politics shows.*

**Keywords:** Sarawak State Election, Dayak, Dayak politics, Dayakism, development

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Dayak accounts for 40% of Sarawak’s total population. The term Dayak refers loosely to Sarawak’s main indigenous group comprising the Iban, Bidayuh and Orang Ulu. The Orang Ulu or “upriver people” represents Sarawak’s minority ethnic groups living mainly in the interior areas. The Orang Ulu consists of the Kelabit, Kenyah (including Sebop, Seping, Kiput, Badang and Berawan) Bukitan, Bisaya, Kayan, Kajang (including Sekapan, Kejaman, Lahanan, Punan, Tanjong and Kanowit), Lugat Lisum, Lun Bawang, Penan, Sian, Tabun, Ukit and Saban (Seling and Langub 1989, 35, cited in Jehom 1999, 83–98). The Iban is the largest ethnic group at 28.89%, followed by the Bidayuh (8.04%) and the Orang Ulu (6.33%) (Table 1). Due to their population size, obtaining the support of the Dayak is crucial for the state’s political elites—more so as no ethnic group in Sarawak can command a majority and can form the government on its own.

In the 2016 Sarawak State Election (SSE16), out of the 34 Dayak-majority seats, the then Barisan Nasional (BN) Sarawak, led by Adenan Satem, won all the 21 Iban-majority seats, seven Bidayuh-majority seats, and four Orang Ulu-majority seats. Sarawak BN under Adenan was so popular that it garnered more than 60% of the Iban and Bidayuh votes and more than half of the Orang Ulu votes. The opposition could only settle with less than 40% of the popular votes in the Dayak-majority areas.

However, Sarawak BN’s exceptional performance in the Dayak-majority constituencies was dented after losing six Dayak-majority parliamentary seats to the opposition in the 14th General Election of 2018, paving the way for Pakatan Harapan’s (PH) component parties—Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Democratic Action Party (DAP)—to strengthen their foothold on Sarawak politics. The six seats were Selangau, Saratok, Julau, Lubok Antu, Puncak Borneo and Mas Gading. The Sarawak BN’s defeat in these areas was “unusual” given its dominance in Sarawak’s rural constituencies for decades. Sarawak BN’s loss was attributed to internal infighting, Native Customary Land (NCR) issues,<sup>1</sup> impacts of national politics on voters’ sentiments, and the role of social media (Mersat 2018). The opposition’s breakthrough in Sarawak in the 14th General Election not only weakened Sarawak BN but also raised doubts about its future in local politics.

Adenan’s successor, Abang Johari Openg (or Abang Jo as he is popularly known), moved to disassociate the ruling local political elites from their federal coalition partners by forming Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) comprising all the former Sarawak BN component parties: Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Sarawak

United People's Party (SUPP), People's Democratic Party (PDP)<sup>2</sup> and Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS).

By going “independent”, GPS hoped to form a government with whichever political entities that were in power at the federal level. The strategy paid off as following the fall of the PH-led federal government in 2020, GPS joined the federal government led by Perikatan Nasional (PN) under Muhyiddin Yassin. After Muhyiddin's resignation in 2021, GPS continued to be part of the ruling federal government under Ismail Sabri of BN.

GPS's main challenge was not only to repeat Adenan's massive win in SSE16 but also to regain the support of the Dayak who abandoned the ruling coalition in the 14th General Election. Doing so forced GPS to face its critics who blamed the ruling coalition for marginalising the Dayak throughout their decades-long rule over Sarawak (Vengadesan 2021). GPS's opponents also claimed that none of the Dayak leaders in GPS were serious about helping the Dayak other than to serve their own personal interests (*Dayak Daily* 2018).

It was against this perceived marginalisation of the Dayak that new parties such as Parti Sarawak Bersatu (PSB), Parti Bumi Kenyalang (PBK) and Parti Aspirasi Rakyat Sarawak (ASPIRASI) emerged to champion Dayak issues. However, none of the mentioned parties were as nationalistic as Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak Baru (PBDSB) that claimed to be “a [sic] symbol [in the fight] for Dayak interest” (*Borneo Post Online* 2021a).

This article focuses on Dayak politics during the 2021 Sarawak State Election (henceforth, SSE21). It examines the results in constituencies with a Dayak majority, Dayak issues and the factors that led to GPS's overwhelming victory. The article explains why the Dayak continued to support the ruling GPS despite the propagation of Dayak issues by PSB and PBK and the presence of ethnonationalist parties such as PBDSB.

One can argue that the Dayak voted for GPS due to the ruling coalition's ability in providing tangible development that is beneficial to the Dayak. Development in the forms of cash assistance, infrastructure, and agricultural aids were all important to the Dayak as they navigated the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic with their economic standing. The opposition offered the Dayak the chief minister's position, equitable political representation, and a fairer economic system. However, the raising of the Dayak sentiment in the hopes of swinging the Dayak support was not successful as the Dayak – and Sarawakians generally – were more affected by regional than ethnic sentiment. At the outset, it is clear that Dayakism was superseded by the “Sarawak First” sentiment promoted by GPS.

The Dayak political division had reduced the opposition's chances of capturing the Dayak support. GPS took advantage of the split votes but was challenged by the newcomer PSB particularly for the Iban and Orang Ulu votes. The challenge was not strong enough to change the state government, but it provided the opportunity for local-based parties such as PSB and PBK to test the waters in preparation for the next state election.

The article is based on fieldwork throughout the SSE21 in Serian, Betong, Sri Aman and Selangau. Interviews were conducted with candidates, party volunteers, party insiders and Dayak professionals focusing on issues such as "Dayakism", the importance of development and economic survival to the Dayak, political division among the Dayak, and the future of Dayak politics. The electoral data were tabulated from the polling centres and the Malaysian Election Commission's (EC) website focusing on the share of the popular votes obtained by the candidates and political parties contesting in the Dayak-majority seats.

Table 1: Sarawak's population according to ethnic groups

Ethnic group	Total (%)
Citizen	2,286,067 (95.26)
<i>Bumiputera</i> (indigenous people)	1,709,856 (71.24)
Malay	551,567 (22.98)
Iban	693,358 (28.89)
Bidayuh	192,960 (8.04)
Melanau	119,897 (5.00)
Other <i>bumiputera</i>	152,074 (6.33)
Non- <i>bumiputera</i>	576,211 (24.01)
Chinese	560,150 (23.34)
Indian	7,188 (0.29)
Others	8,873 (0.37)
Non-citizen	113,772 (4.74)
Total population	2,399,839 (100.00)

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Studies of Malaysia's electoral politics have long revolved around the concept of ethnic politics which is generally understood as the competition for political power among the key ethnic groups (Means 1970; Vasil 1980; Funston 1980; Horowitz 1985). The argument is that political parties in Malaysia draw much of

their support from particular ethnic groups and the elite's resort to ethnic demands to win support. This is understandable as political parties have always strived to represent the interests of the country's major ethnic groups since independence.

The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), for instance, has been the dominant force in the rural Malay heartlands for decades. UMNO's rival, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), has been hugely popular among the Malays in the East Coast Region of West Malaysia. The large bulk of the rural Malay support remains with the two parties until Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU) arrived on the scene. Support for PAS's splinter Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH) emanates largely from the semi-urban and urban Malays who are inclined to support the party's brand of progressive Islam. The Chinese in West Malaysia was initially split between the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and DAP. However, in recent years, more Chinese have shifted their support either to DAP or PKR. Despite claiming to be a multiracial party, DAP is essentially Chinese-based judging from its base support and leadership line-up. Another ethnic-based party, the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), was a leading party for the Indians until it was gradually weakened by PKR since 2008. It is evident from the outset that political parties in Malaysia predominantly exhibit an ethnic-based nature, relying significantly on the backing of specific ethnic communities. However, it is contended by several scholars that there exist indications of cross-ethnic backing, particularly subsequent to the decline of the BN's hegemony (Maznah 2008; Pepinsky 2009; Ng et al. 2015).

Ethnic politics and the nature of ethnic electoral competition in West Malaysia fit well into Horowitz's theory of ethnic party competition (Horowitz 1985). According to Horowitz, in ethnically divided societies, electoral competition drives the ethnic-based parties apart as they move to entice the support of particular ethnic groups. This is called "divergent" or "centrifugal" competitive appeals. This explains why political parties in West Malaysia continue to seek the support of particular ethnic groups, making the arena for electoral competition heavily ethnicised. In contrast, in a non-ethnic political environment, non-ethnic-based parties compete to win the support of "floating voters", bringing the parties closer to the centre. Horowitz calls this "convergent" or "centripetal" competitive appeals.

However, Horowitz's theory can only be partially applied in Sarawak. Even though political parties were formed to serve the agenda of particular ethnic groups, the arena for electoral competition is not necessarily heavily ethnicised as in West Malaysia. There is a tendency for the political parties in Sarawak to move towards centripetal rather than centrifugal direction given the potency of state-based issues. Furthermore, as no single ethnic group is in the majority and due to Sarawak's

multicultural make-up, ethnic politics becomes less prominent in the electoral arena. An analysis of the Dayak-majority seats shows that ethnic appeals were not as popular. PSB, PBK and PBDSB strongly promoted Dayak issues in their campaign manifestoes but could only win two seats. Instead, a majority of the popular Dayak votes and seats went to GPS, which mainly relied on state-based issues to win support. Moreover, the fact that the Dayak were politically deeply fragmented made it difficult for political parties championing the Dayak cause to use ethnic appeals to consolidate their position.

## BATTLEGROUND FOR DAYAK POLITICS

In 2021, 34 Dayak-majority constituencies contested in the SSE21 (Mazwin 2021). A Dayak-majority seat in this article is defined as an area where the Dayak form more than 50% of the total population. Most of the Dayak-majority seats are located in Sarawak's rural areas. Out of the 34 Dayak-majority seats, 22 are predominantly Iban, 7 Bidayuh, and 5 Orang Ulu (Mazwin 2021).

The population composition in the five Orang Ulu seats – Ba' Kelalan, Mulu, Telang Usan, Murum and Belaga – reveals the extent of Sarawak's ethnic diversity in the interior areas. The Lun Bawang (the Kelabit's cultural cousin) form the majority ethnic group in Ba' Kelalan, while the Kenyah, Kayan and Penan are the major ethnic groups in Mulu, Telang Usan, Murum and Belaga. Uncovering this ethnic diversity lays bare the subtlety of ethnic politics in Sarawak. In Telang Usan, for instance, the issue of contention is the struggle for power between the high aristocrats (*maren* in Kayan and *deta'u bio* in Kenyah) and the commoners (*panyin* in Kayan and Kenyah) (Ngau 2017; Sellato 2002).

Based on the ethnic composition of the existing political parties in Sarawak, it is obvious that the Dayak are politically fragmented. The main Dayak-based party in GPS is PRS, which controls 11 Dayak-majority seats.<sup>3</sup> Even though the Dayak are also represented in other GPS component parties such as PBB, SUPP and PDP, their presence is not as politically potent. The Dayak are also represented in PBK, PSB, PKR, DAP, ASPIRASI, PBDSB, AMANAH and Parti Sedar Rakyat Sarawak (SEDAR).

GPS fielded candidates in all the 34 Dayak-majority seats (Table 2). GPS's close challenger PSB fielded 34 candidates as well while PBK fielded 30 candidates. PKR and DAP fielded 15 and nine candidates respectively. PBDSB only contested in 11 Dayak-majority areas while ASPIRASI and SEDAR fielded candidates in three and one Dayak-majority areas, respectively.

Table 2: Political parties contesting in Dayak-majority seats

Political parties	Dayak seats contested
GPS	
PBB	16
SUPP	3
PDP	4
PRS	11
PBK	30
PSB	34
PKR	15
DAP	9
ASPIRASI	3
PBDSB	11
AMANAH	0
SEDAR	1
PAS	0
Independent	13

## MANIFESTOES, CAMPAIGNING AND ISSUES

At the start of campaigning, it was clear that the battle was between GPS and PSB. If campaign posters and banners were anything to go by, none could match GPS and PSB. What was missing during campaigning this time was that there were no *ceramah* (public rallies) and big walkabouts by the candidates. Campaigning was also performed occasionally through social media.

Campaigning in Sarawak has always been a challenge. Some areas are difficult to reach. Other areas can only be visited either by boats or four-wheel drives. The COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) forced the parties and candidates to resort to the unconventional ways of campaigning, leading many to using Facebook and WhatsApp to reach out to their supporters. Campaigning via social media, however, has its limitations such as lack of engagement between the candidates and the voters.

As “personal touch” is important during campaigning, one candidate from PSB said he took the trouble to visit one long house to another despite the COVID-19 restrictions even if he had to do so without a large entourage as was the usual practice (Johnical Rayong, pers. comm, 16 August 2022).

Most candidates also relied on the assistance from the *penghulu* (community traditional chief), *ketua kampung* (village head) and *tuai rumah* (head of longhouse) to spearhead their campaign messages to the voters. Maintaining a close rapport with the community leaders is important as they act as the eyes and ears of the candidates.

Campaigning via social media channels such as YouTube was more popular in semi-urban and urban areas where internet connection was not a major problem. The candidates would record themselves, sometimes spontaneously, and share their videos with the voters. Others took the extra mile of organising mini “talk shows” during which they discussed their plans when elected for office.

Nevertheless, not all of the candidates could use social media optimally and effectively during campaigning, particularly in areas where internet penetration was low. There were people living in the longhouses who did not have smartphones, making campaigning on social media difficult and not as widespread (Norina Utot, pers. comm, 19 August 2022). Another challenge was that those who possessed smartphones were mostly young people who were not registered voters (*ibid.*).

Campaign issues varied from development, infrastructures, NCR land ownership, Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63), employment, economic opportunities, to others. GPS campaigned along the tagline of “Stability, Prosperity and Glory” (Lam 2021). In unveiling the 34 pledges and initiatives to develop Sarawak, GPS did not specifically mention the Dayak in its manifesto. However, GPS promised to recognise and guarantee the people’s rights to NCR and native territorial domain which is a hot issue in the Dayak areas (*ibid.*).

Compared to the other parties, GPS faced little difficulties in campaigning throughout the pandemic period. This was because the majority of its candidates were old faces who were already well known among the voters. Hence, even if GPS candidates decided not to cover as many areas during campaigning, they would not run the risk of losing substantial votes from their support base.

In SSE16, Sarawak BN focused its campaign largely on Adenan’s personality and the “Adenan Team” (Weiss and Puyok 2017). Sarawak BN’s presidential style of campaigning was effective in that it appeals to the people to vote for the populist Adenan (*ibid.*). In SSE21, the attention was shifted to GPS as it was a relatively new coalition with a new logo. Breaking from BN’s shadow was not difficult for GPS because it had started to introduce the coalition as early as 2018.



PSB pledged to make sweeping changes in the state's administration, promising to appoint four deputy chief ministers to represent Sarawak's diverse ethnic groups (*Borneo Post Online* 2021b). It was also committed to making the state cabinet more representative to reflect Sarawak's multicultural society. Other than pledging to convert leasehold residential land titles to freehold, PSB also promised to issue established NCR titles in perpetuity (Parti Sarawak Bersatu, n.d.).

In its attempt to woo the support of the Dayak, PSB promised to appoint a Dayak as the chief minister (*Borneo Post Online* 2021b). PSB's president Wong Soon Koh said:

[It] is time for the community to come out in full force on polling day to support PSB. If we get their overwhelming support, appointing a Dayak chief minister is a must, this will be a reality. (Mazwin 2021)

Of all the parties contesting, none was as bold as PBK that wanted "to set Sarawak free from the Federation of Malaysia and to restore Sarawak as an independent country" (Parti Bumi Kenyalang in *Quest of Independence* n.d.). PBK's call for independence received mixed reactions with some regarding it as "extreme" and "rhetorical" (*New Sarawak Tribune* 2021a; 2021b).

It was obvious that PBK was riding on the strong anti-Peninsular sentiment in Sarawak even though Sarawakians in general did not believe that separation from the federation was practical for the time being. To convince the Dayak, PBK pledged to "confiscate" NCR lands and return them to their rightful owners, citing the example of African countries that had done the same (Parti Bumi Kenyalang in *Quest of Independence* n.d.).

Campaigning separately since their fallout with the PH-led federal government, PKR, DAP and AMANAH had a strong pro-Sarawak stance as well, aiming to restore Sarawak's status in accordance to MA63. However, without big names like Baru Bian, Ali Biju and Willie Mongin, Sarawak PH leaders led a lacklustre campaign even with Anwar Ibrahim's presence in Beting Maro. Anwar spoke about his favourite subjects such as corruption and misuse of power by the ruling political elites, urging the people to change their mindset and reject GPS and PSB which were supposedly aided by the tycoons.

Claiming the Dayak was "second class community" despite being in the majority, PBDSB called the voters to rally behind the party's candidates to fight for the rights of the Dayaks (Then 2021). PBDSB raised the issue of some Dayak living without identification card (IC) even though they were born in Sarawak. Like PSB

and PBK, PBDSB also pledged to appoint a Dayak to be chief minister if it was voted into power.

ASPIRASI's and SEDAR's vision for Sarawak was identical with PBK's. However, instead of calling for an independent Sarawak, they aimed to spearhead the Sarawak Independence Referendum.<sup>4</sup> ASPIRASI, too, promised to appoint a Dayak as chief minister if it was elected. ASPIRASI president, Lina Soo said:

Sarawak voters, this upcoming PRN12 is a chance (for change). This window of opportunity only comes once in 58 years. As such, we urge our voters to vote and realise the change that we can bring, which is the time for a Dayak Chief Minister. (*Dayak Daily* 2021a)

## RESULTS

The results from the analysis revealed the extent of GPS's dominance and popularity. GPS outperformed the other parties in most of the seats particularly in the Dayak-majority areas. In the Iban areas, GPS won 21 seats (Table 3). PSB won the remaining one seat through Johnical Rayong even though his popular votes dropped by more than 20%.

The opposition was totally decimated in the Bidayuh areas as all seven of the Bidayuh-majority seats went to GPS (Table 4). GPS also scored a big win in the Orang Ulu-majority areas, winning four out of five seats except in Ba' Kelalan which was retained by Baru Bian of PSB (Table 5). In fact, Baru managed to increase his majority by 65 votes.

In terms of popular votes, GPS won more than half in the Iban, Bidayuh and Orang Ulu areas. However, compared to SSE16, GPS popular votes in SSE21 dropped by 8% and 7% in the Iban and Bidayuh areas.

Table 3: Seats won in Iban-majority areas in SSE16 and SSE21

Party	Seat won in SSE16	Seat won in SSE21
GPS	21	21
PBK	–	–
PSB	–	1 (Engkilili)
PKR	1 (Krian)	–
DAP	–	–
ASPIRASI	–	–

(continued on next page)

Table 3: (continued)

Party	Seat won in SSE16	Seat won in SSE21
PBDSB	–	–
AMANAH	–	–
SEDAR	–	–
PAS	–	–
Independent	–	–

Table 4: Seats won in Bidayuh-majority areas in SSE16 and SSE21

Party	Seat won in SSE16	Seat won in SSE21
GPS	7	7
PBK	–	–
PSB	–	–
PKR	–	–
DAP	–	–
ASPIRASI	–	–
PBDSB	–	–
AMANAH	–	–
SEDAR	–	–
PAS	–	–
Independent	–	–

Table 5: Seats won in Orang Ulu-majority areas in SSE16 and SSE21

Party	Seat won in SSE16	Seat won in SSE21
GPS	4	4
PBK	–	–
PSB	–	1 (Ba' Kelalan)
PKR	1 (Ba' Kelalan)	–
DAP	–	–
ASPIRASI	–	–
PBDSB	–	–
AMANAH	–	–
SEDAR	–	–
PAS	–	–
Independent	–	–

DAP and PKR suffered huge losses. In the Iban areas, for instance, DAP and PKR combined obtained 20.96% of the popular votes in 2016. In 2021, their popular votes were only 3.91%. Their popular votes in the Bidayuh areas were 30.21%

in 2016 but decreased to 9.39% in 2021. The same trend could also be seen in the Orang Ulu areas where the popular votes obtained by DAP and PKR reduced by 27.76%.

It is clear from the results that DAP and PKR were outperformed by local-based parties such as PSB and PBK. Interestingly, at the individual party level, PSB was slightly more popular than PRS. In the Iban areas, for instance, PSB's popular votes were 29.84% compared to PRS's 28.22%. PSB also appeared to be somewhat popular among the voters in the Bidayuh and Orang Ulu areas compared to other opposition parties.

The overall voting trend indicated a substantial increase in the popular support for GPS. The Dayak especially maintained their support for the ruling coalition and at the same time overwhelmingly rejected Peninsular-based parties such as DAP and PKR. The shift of Dayak support from DAP and PKR to locally-based opposition groups raises concerns regarding the continued significance of DAP and PKR in the political landscape of Sarawak.

PSB's presence in the Dayak-majority constituencies was not strong enough to dislodge GPS's influence but they were able to break up the ruling coalition's monopoly over popular support, particularly among the Iban and Orang Ulu voters.

Another way of looking at the extent of GPS's big win is to look at its performance in areas where there were more than two candidates contesting. A close analysis revealed that popular votes for GPS in three-cornered, four-cornered, five-cornered and six-cornered contests were all more than 50% except in Simanggang, Batang Ai, Engkilili, Krian, Pakan, Ngemah, Kemena, Ba' Kelalan and Opar where the ruling coalition's vote share was less than 50% (Table 6). This implies that the participation of many parties and independent candidates did not undermine the strength of the ruling coalition, but rather worked in its favour by causing a split of votes.

How about GPS's performance in areas under the parliamentary seats of Selangau, Saratok, Julau, Lubok Antu, Puncak Borneo and Mas Gading, which were controlled by the opposition? The results were quite telling and indicated a significant swing of support back to the ruling coalition. GPS won more than half of the popular votes in seven Dayak-majority areas under the six parliamentary seats except in Batang Ai, Pakan, Krian, Engkilili and Ba' Kelalan (Table 7).

Table 6: GPS's share of popular votes in multi-cornered contests

Seat	Ethnic predominant	Share of popular votes (%)
Simanggang	Iban	48.94
Batang Ai	Iban	44.58
Engkilili	Iban	27.52
Krian	Iban	43.67
Pakan	Iban	41.13
Ngemah	Iban	46.23
Kemena	Iban	48.50
Ba'kelalan	Lun Bawang	40.83
Opar	Bidayuh	46.77

Table 7: GPS's performance in opposition-controlled parliamentary seats

Parliamentary/DUN seat	Ethnic predominant	Party won	Share of popular votes (%)
Selangau			
Tamin	Iban	PRS/GPS	64.99
Kakus	Iban	PRS/GPS	52.35
Saratok			
Kalaka	Malay/Melanau	PBB/GPS	72.43
Krian	Iban	PDP/GPS	43.67
Kabong	Malay/Melanau	PBB/GPS	67.32
Julau			
Pakan	Iban	PBB/GPS	41.13
Meluan	Iban	PDP/GPS	53.21
Lubok Antu			
Engkilili	Iban	PSB	27.52
Batang Ai	Iban	PRS/GPS	44.58
Puncak Borneo			
Serembu	Bidayuh	PBB/GPS	57.69
Mambong	Bidayuh	PBB/GPS	52.00
Tarat	Bidayuh	PBB/GPS	60.25
Mas Gading			
Opar	Bidayuh	SUPP/GPS	46.77
Tasik Biru	Bidayuh	PDP/GPS	53.71

## “DAYAKISM” OR SARAWAK FIRST?

Numerous questions arise in light of the results. Why did the Dayak seem unfazed by the existence of nationalistic Dayak-oriented parties like PBDSB and the promise of the chief ministership offered by PSB and ASPIRASI? Is “Dayakism” no longer relevant? Was the Dayak political division the reason behind the opposition’s inability to win their support? Was the Dayak support for GPS a result of the ruling coalition’s capacity to provide the Dayak with tangible development?

The term Dayakism is generally believed to have been coined by the late Daniel Tajem, Sarawak’s former deputy chief minister and one of Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak’s (PBDS)<sup>5</sup> founding members. Dayakism is interpreted loosely as the rise of Dayak political consciousness as a result of their political and socioeconomic marginalisation. Previous Dayak leaders such as Tajem used Dayakism as a political battle cry to arouse support among the Dayaks through PBDS following the party’s rise in state politics after the 1987 state elections (Jawan 1987). Dayakism touches on issues that the Dayak face, such as NCR land ownership, underrepresentation in civil service, lack of opportunities in business and education, and so on.

Prior to SSE21, a forum titled “Dayakism in the upcoming Sarawak election”, featuring leading Dayak leaders and personalities,<sup>6</sup> brought the topic to life again. In the forum, the panelists discussed the relevance of Dayakism and its impacts on the election. They generally agreed that Dayakism was still relevant, arguing that even though the Dayak is the largest indigenous population group in Sarawak, they face “discrimination” in university admission, scholarship awards, promotion in the civil service, and NCR land ownership. Bobby William, one of the forum’s panel members and PBDSB president, said that SSE21 provided the opportunity for Dayakism to be highlighted once more through a Dayak-based party such as PBDSB as no Dayak leaders and parties were talking about Dayak identity and Dayakism.

Responses to Dayakism outside of the forum, however, are mixed. For some, Dayakism is a response to the “Malay supremacy” movement propounded by the right-wing Malay groups. Thus, as long as this movement remains active, “Dayakism is not only needed but necessary” (an anonymous senior Dayak civil servant, pers. comm., 19 August 2022). Dayakism is also promoted because the country’s economic policies are heavily in favour of the Malay-Muslim *bumiputera* (Norina Utot, pers.comm.). Even though the Dayak are the biggest indigenous group in Sarawak, they are treated as “second-class *bumiputera*” and receive less benefit from the country’s economic prosperity (ibid.).

Other Dayaks remain cautious about promoting Dayakism in the context of Sarawak's multiracial society and the state's position in the federation. For them, Dayakism is relevant but it must be pursued within the context of Sarawak's position in the federation (Johnical Rayong, pers. comm.). In addition, the Dayak have to work together with other ethnic groups in order to rule the state as no political parties can survive by just leveraging on Dayakism alone (Elvis Dudit, pers. comm., 10 August 2022).

Not all of the Dayaks supported Dayakism, arguing that the issue is not about the Dayak being discriminated but the inability of the Dayak leaders to deal with Dayak issues effectively (Puyok 2021). To them, it is not an issue of whether or not the Dayak are in a position of power; as long as the Dayak leaders carry out their responsibilities in addressing the people's needs, the premier does not need to be a Dayak (an anonymous Dayak professional, pers. comm., 18 August 2022).

On the alleged marginalisation of the Dayak, some believe that this is not the case as the state's economic policies do not marginalise any group (Jerry Siran, pers. comm., 6 August 2022). In fact, there are many Dayak who are successful businessmen and contractors. Some even become millionaire oil palm smallholders and many have attained higher education (an anonymous Dayak professional, pers. comm.). The success of the Dayak people should not be measured by just looking at the number of Dayak holding top posts in the government but also in the private sector (*ibid.*).

The Dayak are given ample economic opportunities, invited to bid for contracts and to share power in the government (*ibid.*). Some are also given the chance to hold important positions in the government and private sectors. What is important is for the Dayak to grab the opportunities that are available around them (*ibid.*).

Depending on Dayakism to arouse the nationalistic sentiment among the Dayak failed to swing the Dayak support to PSB, PBK and PBDSB. As revealed in the interview responses, not all Dayaks believed that the alleged Dayak disenfranchisement is an issue even though a majority viewed that Dayakism cannot be separated from the Dayak psyche.

Another reason why Dayakism did not resonate with many Dayak is because regional identity is stronger than ethnic identity in Sarawak. Most Dayak support the slogan "Sarawak for Sarawakians" and see themselves as a Sarawakian first before their ethnicity. Some view Dayakism as "unsuitable" as Sarawakians live in a multiracial society (an anonymous Dayak federal civil servant, pers. comm., 5 August 2022).

For the Dayaks, the main issue is development and socioeconomic growth. As most of the Dayaks live in rural areas in which basic infrastructural needs are still lacking, Dayakism does not appeal to them. The Dayaks need road access, electricity, and institutional support to fund their agricultural activities. This explains why GPS is able to maintain the support of the mainly rural Dayaks using development to garner support among the Dayak. This topic is further discussed in the following section.

## **DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS AND ECONOMIC SURVIVAL**

The COVID-19 pandemic has left an indelible mark on the people's economic life. It has caused many to lose their jobs, therefore affecting the people's sources of income. The hardest hit was those living in the rural areas. In Sarawak, for instance, absolute poverty rose from 9.0% in 2019 to 12.9% in 2020, making the state the third largest in terms of the incidence of absolute poverty (Department of Statistics 2020a).

The rural population represents the bulk of the poor people in Sarawak. In 2019, poverty rate in the rural areas was 14.6%, compared to 4.8% in the urban areas. Relative poverty in the rural areas of Sarawak in the same year was also high at 26.1%, compared to the urban areas at 7.1% (Department of Statistics 2020b). According to a report published in the *Borneo Post* on 29 January 2019, 13 out of 28 poor districts in Malaysia were located in Sarawak. Most of these 13 areas were populated by the Dayak.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Pakan – a small town in Sarikei inhabited by the Dayak – was recorded as the poorest district.

The Dayaks need access to resources and assistance from the government to support their agricultural activities as their main sources of livelihood. The COVID-19 pandemic has added to the challenges faced by the Dayak in the rural area and the state government under GPS was quick to lend a hand, thanks to its incumbency advantage and access to state resources. GPS has been able to provide direct cash assistance and also development aids to the Dayak.

On 23 March 2020, under the state government's Sarawakku Sayang Special Package, RM1.15 billion was allocated to reduce the impact of COVID-19. This involved a disbursement of cash aid to Sarawakians from the low-income category or B40. Under this scheme, those from the low-income group received a monthly payment of RM250 for six months (Ling 2020). Not long after the first financial package roll-out, the state government allocated an additional RM16.4 million in the form of food assistance to the poor in rural and urban areas particularly those who were homeless and had lost their employment (*Daily Express Online* 2020).



Under the third Sarawakku Sayang Special Package, RM300 million was allocated to reduce the people's burden involving a one-off cash payment of RM500 for single Sarawakians, a one-off payment of RM500 for registered river taxi owner, a one-off cash payment of RM600 for licensed van operators, taxi drivers, school buses and van operators, a special grant of RM1,500 for tourist guides and park guides, and a one-off grant of RM1,500 for members of the media (Lumandan 2020). On 10 October 2021, the state government gave RM60 million financial assistance to pepper and oil palm farmers affected by COVID-19 (*Dayak Daily* 2021b).

In urban and affluent areas, the influence of patronage politics on the voting behaviour of the Dayak may have diminished. However, in numerous rural areas characterised by inadequate infrastructure and prevailing poverty, patronage politics continues to wield significant influence as a means to garner support among the Dayak (Mersat 2018).

Patronage politics is a culture that is rooted within the Dayak political life. Thus, "as long as the Dayak continue to depend on the government and as long as they have this sort of (patronage) mentality, it is difficult to change the government" (Johnical Rayong, pers. comm.).

For some, development is regarded as "money politics" and "bribery" in disguise. However, for the Dayak, development in terms of cash handouts and infrastructural projects is a necessity to survive and to uplift their socioeconomic standing. As most of the Dayak are still poor, small handouts, basic development, and "projects" mean a lot to them (Norina Utot, pers. comm.). This explains why GPS's "*projek kilat*"<sup>8</sup> strategy worked in enticing the Dayak to support the ruling government (*ibid.*).

Nonetheless, not all of the Dayak can be easily lured by development to support the ruling government (Puyok 2005). Some appear to have the temerity to go against the tide and proffer their own idea of development. A case in point is the predominantly Lun Bawang area of Ba' Kelalan (Puyok 2005; 2006). The Lun Bawang have voted against the ruling government and supported Baru since 2011. Arguably, Baru has been successful in changing the mindset of the people that development should not be viewed from the material aspect alone. This message has resonated well among the largely Christian Lun Bawang as is it often laced with biblical principles. Baru's advantage is that he was a former SIB<sup>9</sup> church elder, consequently, he is able to deliver his political message to the SIB followers in Ba' Kelalan better than the ruling coalition.

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The role of the Lun Bawang intellectuals, particularly teachers and pastors, is also significant in mobilising support for Baru. Even though a majority of the Lun Bawang are subsistence farmers, a significant number are professionals working in the government and private sectors, contributing to the growing size of the Lun Bawang middle class, who support Baru either indirectly or directly (Puyok 2017).

That said, it is also important to mention that Baru's majority in Ba' Kelalan since winning the seat in 2011 has always been marginal. Therefore, unless a candidate of Baru's credibility and stature is fielded to challenge him, Baru is expected to remain at the helm of Lun Bawang politics for years to come.

## **DAYAK POLITICS POST SSE21**

Similar to the indigenous Kadazandusun in Sabah, the Dayaks exhibit political division. Although the Kadazandusun lack significant population numbers, the Dayaks possess a comparatively larger population size. Nevertheless, the political importance of the Dayak is diminished due to the escalating political fragmentation among the ruling class, a situation that mirrors the challenges encountered by the Kadazandusun.

The Dayak enjoyed political "unity" and "preeminence" through Sarawak National Party (SNAP) in the early 1960s as they found refuge in the party to represent their interests in Sarawak. In fact, through SNAP, Stephen Kalong Ningkan was appointed as the first Dayak Chief Minister of Sarawak.

However, other Dayak, especially the Iban from Batang Rajang, refused to join SNAP, claiming that it was formed only to represent the Iban from Saribas, leading them to form Parti Pesaka Anak Sarawak (PESAKA). SNAP's influence among the Dayak weakened following a series of leadership tussles within the party which led to the formation of PBDS in 1983.

As time went by, the political division among the Dayak, particularly the Iban, became wider as they were represented by SNAP, PBDS and PESAKA, respectively. The results of the election revealed the extent of the Dayak political fragmentation (Table 8). The bulk of the Dayak popular support in GPS went to PBB and PRS while the rest went to PSB (Table 8).

Table 8: Popular votes according to ethnic groups

Party	SSE16 (%)					SSE21 (%)						
	Malay/ Melanu	Iban	Chinese	Bidayuh	Orang Ulu	Mixed	Malay/ Melanu	Iban	Chinese	Bidayuh	Orang Ulu	Mixed
GPS												
BN-direct candidates*	2.10	11.07	14.40	20.05	11.69	16.47	-	-	-	-	-	-
PBB	77.75	17.75	-	32.58	11.81	37.28	76.19	19.3	-	40.99	26.24	57.13
SUPP	-	2.45	30.57	-	-	15.35	-	3.36	46.37	5.62	-	15.29
PDP	-	5.30	-	10.45	8.48	-	-	5.12	-	9.71	6.94	-
PRS	-	27.32	-	-	27.09	-	-	28.22	-	-	28.12	-
Subtotal	79.85	63.89	44.97	63.08	59.07	69.1	76.19	56.0	46.37	56.32	61.30	72.42
PH												
DAP	-	6.66	46.66	15.71	3.64	16.14	-	1.99	22.68	5.4	-	6.16
PKR	8.33	14.30	4.85	14.5	32.67	8.36	3.46	1.92	0.95	3.99	8.55	3.04
AMANAH	4.36	-	-	-	-	-	1.41	-	-	-	-	-
Subtotal	12.69	20.96	51.51	30.21	36.31	24.5	4.87	3.91	23.63	9.39	8.55	9.20
PBK	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.64	2.02	10.21	11.30	1.64	5.77
PSB	-	-	-	-	-	-	10.86	29.84	16.9	21.62	27.49	11.86
PBDSB	-	0.05	-	1.04	-	0.64	-	0.67	0.46	0.34	0.55	0.74
ASPIRASI	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.03	1.16	0.36	-	-
SEDAR	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.49	-	-	0.25	-	-
BERSATU	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
PAS	5.71	0.56	0.21	-	-	1.19	0.96	-	-	-	-	-
Others	0.07	-	0.73	0.18	-	1.19	-	-	-	-	-	-
Independent	1.67	14.54	2.58	5.49	4.63	3.38	4.00	7.53	1.27	0.42	0.47	-
Subtotal	7.45	15.15	3.52	6.71	4.63	6.40	18.95	40.09	30.00	34.29	30.15	18.37

Note: \*They were called as BN-direct candidates under a formula mooted by Adenan to resolve the clashes between SUPP and its splinter United People's Party (UPP) and Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) and its offshoot Parti Tenaga Rakyat Sarawak (TERAS). The strategy worked as 11 out of 13 BN-direct candidates won in SSE16.

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Despite their attempt to appease the Dayak with a promise to appoint a Dayak as chief minister, PSB, PBDSB and ASPIRASI failed to sway the Dayak support from GPS. PSB may have the experience and personalities to push the agenda forward for the Dayak but many Dayak were not convinced because it was led by a non-Dayak (an anonymous Dayak federal civil servant, pers. comm.; Elvis Didit, pers. comm.).

In Sarawak, ethnicity does play a role in electoral politics even though it is expressed rather subtly and not as full blown as in Peninsular Malaysia. At the end of the day, it is still patronage and personality politics that determine how the people vote.

Most were not particularly interested in PBK and were not convinced that the party was competent to lead the state. Some also found that the party's call for independence, i.e., separating Sarawak from Malaysia, was an "impossible" thing to do (an anonymous Dayak federal civil servant, pers. comm.). The Dayak wanted to fight for Sarawak's rights, not to secede from the federation (Johnical Rayong, pers. comm.). Furthermore, they regarded PBK as a "new player" and therefore, did not possess the experience to administer Sarawak (an anonymous Dayak federal civil servant, pers. comm.).

The Dayak were not persuaded to support PBDSB even with the party's strong Dayak stance. Like Sabah, Sarawak's politics is highly personalistic. PBDSB did not have big personalities to attract the Dayak. The party also lacked resources and machineries. Many Dayak regarded PBDSB as a small party without any real influence as it only contested in 11 seats.<sup>10</sup>

Political division will continue to characterise Dayak politics as the Dayak will flock to the big personalities with the ability of giving patronage support. Douglas Uggah, the deputy president of PBB, and Joseph Salang, the acting president of PRS in GPS, have their own loyal followers. The Dayaks remain loyal to them because they are in the government, have access to resources, and are able to deliver what the Dayaks need, particularly in the rural areas. Apart from Douglas and Joseph, many looked up to James Masing, the founding president of PRS, as he regularly spoke openly about Sarawak rights and Dayak issues. His untimely death in October 2021 left a huge leadership vacuum in PRS, posing a challenge to the party to keep the Dayak support intact in the upcoming elections.

Outside of GPS, former Sarawak PKR leader Baru Bian was previously touted as a potential Dayak leader who can champion the Dayak cause and bring them under one strong party. However, Baru's decision to leave PKR and join PSB

had affected his good standing in the Dayak community as many questioned his political motives and principles.

## **CONCLUSION**

Dayakism, development and political division among the Dayak characterise Dayak politics in SSE21. The opposition took to Dayakism to entice the Dayak but found little success in swaying the Dayak support from GPS. The opposition's promise to appoint a Dayak as chief minister and their accusation that the GPS had been neglecting the Dayak failed to gain traction among a majority of the Dayak.

The Dayak themselves were divided when it comes to Dayakism. Even though some believed that the Dayak were being discriminated politically and economically, others viewed that the Dayak had progressed well in various fields. Another reason why Dayakism was not well received by the Dayak was because it was eclipsed by the Sarawak First sentiment propounded by the state ruling elites, thanks to Adenan who first brought it to mainstream state politics. Adenan's successor Abang Jo cemented Sarawak First through a series of constitutional amendments in the federal constitution and devolution of power to state authorities.

With more superior election machineries coupled with the ability to deliver tangible development to the Dayak, GPS swept all but two Dayak-majority seats. The millions of ringgits distributed to the people came at the right time, that is, when the country was reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic. As most of the rural Dayak were poor and subsistence farmers, they needed development aid to survive and to support their agricultural activities.

Political division among the Dayak had weakened the opposition. The results showed that split votes in the Dayak areas gave GPS the edge over its close opponents. From the 64 Dayak-majority seats contested by PSB and PBK, only two seats – Engkilili and Ba' Kelalan – were won respectively, while PKR and DAP were completely annihilated. It is highly likely that given the popularity of Sarawak First and the national-based parties' lack of direction, the voters will turn to the local-based parties in future state elections.

The political party that merits close attention is PSB. Although PSB's attempts to change the state government may not have been successful, SSE21 has presented the party with a chance to gauge public sentiment. PSB successfully contested the dominant control of GPS over the Iban and Orang Ulu votes, indicating its potential to emerge as a formidable party in the future.

## NOTES

1. The issue of Native Customary Land (NCR) ownership stems from the differences in the definition and recognition of NCR land by the indigenous community and the state government under the Sarawak Land Code. The NCR lands that some of the native people claim belong to them are bigger than those recognised by the state government under the Sarawak Land Code. Furthermore, under the Sarawak Land Code, claim of ownership over NCR land is not always straightforward as the claimants must show certain proofs to the authorities.
2. Previously known as Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP).
3. The 11 seats are Balai Ringin, Bukit Begunan, Batang Ai, Ngemah, Tamin, Kakus, Pelagus, Baleh, Belaga, Murum and Samalaju.
4. Sarawak Independence Referendum was initiated by ASPIRASI in response to the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) spearheaded by PBK which ASPIRASI said was “not the right way” (Umpang 2022). According to ASPIRASI, independence for Sarawak should be achieved through a “peaceful way” through a referendum, citing Scotland as an example.
5. PBDS was founded and registered in 1983 by a group of dissident Dayaks, led by Leo Moggie and Daniel Tajem, who left SNAP, following their clashes with James Wong, SNAP’s president. PBDS later became a symbol of Dayak’s political revival after its electoral success in the 1987 Sarawak State Election, emerging as the biggest Dayak-based political party in the state’s 48-seat state legislative assembly.
6. The panel members were Bobby William (President of PBDS), John Brian Anthony (Sarawak DAP Central Executive Committee), Joshua Jabing (PKR’s Selangau Branch Chief) and William Liam (former Sarawak AMANAH Deputy Chief and an NCR land activist). James Chin, a Sarawakian academic based in Australia, moderated the forum.
7. The report drew criticism from Dayak leaders such as Pakan assemblyman Mawan Ikom, stating that “[sic.] none of the local populace had to starve or beg for food from people” and that “close to 98 percent of Pakan area has enjoyed a reliable power supply while 68 percent of the settlements had received piped water” (*Sarawak Voice* 2019).
8. “*Projek kilat*” or on-the-spot award of infrastructure projects is a common practice by politicians particularly in the rural areas prior to the election and during campaigning.
9. Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) or Borneo Evangelical Church is an evangelical Christian denomination and the largest Protestant denomination in Malaysia. It was started in rural Sarawak by a group of Australian missionaries in the late 1920s. The Lun Bawang and Kelabit were among the pioneering members of SIB in Sarawak.
10. PBDSB contested in Opar, Bukit Begunan, Ngemah, Dudong, Pelagus, Katibas, Bukit Goram, Murum, Samalaju, Senadin and Marudi.

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