

FROM VOTING BLOC TO FRAGMENTATION: THE CHINESE OPPOSITION VOTES IN THE 2021 SARAWAK STATE ELECTION

Ngu Ik-Tien^{1,2*} and Xing Jing¹

¹Department of Chinese Studies, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

²Malaysian Chinese Research Centre, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: tngu@um.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the voting patterns among the Sarawakian Chinese and their pro-opposition inclination in the 2021 Sarawak State Election (SSE21). It begins by recounting how the national opposition alliances, former Pakatan Harapan (PH) alliances—Barisan Alternatif (BA) and Pakatan Rakyat (PR)—gained popularity among the Chinese voters in Sarawak since the 2006 state elections. The voting trends reveal changes in Chinese voting patterns, from a voting bloc to fragmented votes, and their openness to local opposition parties in the recent state elections. In order to examine the plurality voting pattern and the extent of fragmentation, this research studies two Chinese-majority urban constituencies, Batu Lintang and Bukit Assek in Sarawak. It contends that the Chinese political leanings, including their tendency to embrace regionalism, are profoundly shaped by local and national political developments. In the past two decades, ethno-patronage politics and prevalent corruption practices partly explain the Chinese's quest for regime change. The Sarawak government's emphasis on regional identity and multiculturalism in its official narrative nurtures a sense of belonging, which also impacts Chinese identity politics. This article argues that the decision to support minor parties advocating for separatism can be read as strategic voting of the regional minority who feel deprived of their equal rights. It also contends that political fragmentation among the Chinese might persist if PH fails to consolidate

its previous support. Otherwise, it spells the decline of Parti Sarawak Bersatu (PSB) and Parti Bumi Kenyalang (PBK). The sustainability of local opposition parties depends on the internal reform of parties. The parties should reduce the influences of personal politics as it tends to breed party-hopping, which places parties' future or institutional development at risk of uncertainty.

Keywords: Sarawak election, Chinese, fragmentation, regionalism, opposition politics

INTRODUCTION

The Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) received a strong mandate by winning 76 out of 82 seats in the 2021 Sarawak State Election (SSE21). As expected, the coalition had a clean sweep in Malay-Melanau seats and claimed victory in most Dayak and Chinese seats. The performance of Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP), a GPS component party, was extraordinary as it finally wrested back most of the seats it lost to the opposition parties in the 2006 and 2011 state elections. This article intends to show the political trajectory of Chinese voters from a voting bloc to fragmented votes and the emergence of minor opposition parties against the state political landscape. It examines the extent of fragmentation by untangling plurality voting in selected constituencies. The article locates the topic vis-à-vis regional and national politics and argues that the Chinese minority's political leaning and behaviours are profoundly shaped by the two factors.

Prior to the SSE21, the ethnic Chinese in the Sarawak Cabinet faced political underrepresentation. Out of 11 ministers, only two were Chinese, despite the Chinese constituting 22% of the total state population (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2022). Besides, Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), the strongest party in Sarawak, adopts a *bumiputera*¹ ethnic-based membership policy,² denying ethnic Chinese from joining the party. Such a political structure has affected their representation in important decision-making bodies such as the state assembly and other government bodies. Additionally, the *bumiputera* criterion is widely enforced in government employment, contracts, and public education, further deepening dissatisfaction among middle- and working-class Chinese. This ethno-patronage politics, combined with alleged rampant corruption practices during former Chief Minister Taib Mahmud and former Prime Minister Najib Razak's administration, partly explains the ethnic Chinese's quest for regime changes in Sarawak. However, unlike the Malay-Muslim dominant government in Kuala Lumpur, the Sarawak government emphasises regional identity and multiculturalism in its official narrative, especially after Adenan Satem took over the chief ministership

from Taib in 2014. This narrative promotes a sense of belonging to Sarawak rather than to Malaysia and leaves an impact on Chinese identity politics.

This article begins with an overview of the fluctuating Chinese voting patterns from the Sarawak State Elections in 2006 to 2021. It shows how the opposition parties, particularly the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), rallied electoral support in 2006 which peaked in 2011 but lost the drive in 2016. It identifies the urban-rural or geographical division in voting patterns over the three state elections.

We examine the election results of all Chinese-majority seats in the SSE21 by addressing two dimensions. First, we reveal the overall voting patterns by focusing on the electoral support for established parties like SUPP, DAP and PKR. Then, we move on to focus on the voting patterns and vote share won by the minor parties, Parti Sarawak Bersatu (PSB), Parti Bumi Kenyalang (PBK) and Sarawak People's Aspiration Party (ASPIRASI), in Chinese-majority constituencies. The article moves on to provide an examination of how political fragmentation at the constituency level has impacted the electoral performances of established parties. Finally, we end the article by discussing the sustainability of the local opposition parties.

A RETROSPECT: THE RISE OF PAKATAN RAKYAT AND PAKATAN HARAPAN COALITIONS

The studies on the relationship between the centre and local politics in Malaysia should go beyond the competition between the federal and state governments. In the past two decades, the nationwide solidification of opposition parties, which eventually ousted Barisan Nasional (BN) from the federal government, has been an understudied subject. This facet of politics is equally important as it strengthens our understanding of a feasible political approach other than BN's. The coalition of Pakatan Rakyat (PR), consisting of PKR, DAP and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), was officially founded in 2008, a reconfiguration of a former coalition named Barisan Alternatif (BA).³ The BA and PR provided a platform of cooperation for forging a common goal among the major opposition parties which did not share the same political vision and ideology. The binding factor was the goal of ending the rule of BN and taking over the federal government. Unlike the BN model, BA and PR models, politicians in Sarawak did not form an alliance with local political parties but established instead local branches. Such a model enabled the local PR chapters to present a unifying national front to their supporters and leveraged widespread backing to tackle their ruling competitors. It represented

an alternative political option to the BN model by integrating local politics into national opposition politics. However, such a model easily succumbed to fierce attack amid the rising exclusive regionalism.

BA stumbled over ideological and electoral representation issues in the initial years of formation. The coalition almost crumbled in the 2001 Sarawak State Election as DAP Sarawak pulled out before the polling day.⁴ Its poor performance in the 2001 Sarawak State and 2003 General Elections compelled member parties to develop more feasible electoral strategies in future elections. In 2005, BA was dissolved. PKR and DAP continued to leverage their alliance in the 2006 Sarawak Election and attempted to include local minor opposition parties such as Sarawak National Party (SNAP). The opposition parties adopted a new strategy by fielding only one candidate in each seat, staging a one-to-one straight fight against BN.

In their campaign, opposition parties focused on governance affairs, highlighting the government's wrongdoings and corruption allegations during the lengthy rule of Taib (Welsh 2006; Koo 2006). To many Chinese voters, Sarawak BN led by Taib had lost the credibility of being a local guardian and had turned into a self-serving and greedy predator. This campaigning strategy rewarded the opposition parties with eight seats,⁵ with DAP bagging six. A political analyst dubbed the election "a Chinese revolt" as DAP won a massive 53% of the votes in the seats it contested (Koo 2006).

The success of the opposition pact and campaigning in Sarawak gave a morale boost to the national leaders of PKR and DAP, who then formed PR in 2008. The rebranded coalition emerged as a more united force and successfully won more than one-third of parliamentary seats in the 2008 General Election. As PR moved closer to forming the federal government, the local chapters of PR component parties performed equally well in the 2011 state elections, capturing 15 out of 82 seats with an increase of 8% in the total vote received. Except for Senadin and Bawang Assan, all Chinese-majority seats fell to the opposition parties.

A solid national opposition coalition had increased the likelihood of an unprecedented change of federal government in the near future. This energised political participation among Sarawakians, especially among the ethnic Chinese population. The sense of regionalism was surpassed by national-based collective goals, which were reflected in escalated political participation in the elections and political movements asking for electoral reform, such as the Bersih movement (Merdeka Centre 2015). Table 1 shows that voter turnouts rose more than 10% in Padungan, Batu Kawa, Bawang Assan and Kidurong, and the rest increased

between 5% and 9%. The spike in voting rates was also accompanied by sharp rises in majority votes won by DAP and PKR.

The consolidation of Chinese voters behind DAP and PKR in the 2006 and 2011 state elections was at the expense of SUPP. The resentment of Chinese voters against Taib over alleged corruption issues had eroded their faith in the role of SUPP in pursuing their interests. During this period, opposition propaganda focusing on checks and balances, anti-corruption and good governance resonated well. Despite being a West Malaysia-based political party, DAP was able to tap into Sarawakian voters' frustrations and offer hope to end the overstaying corrupt politicians. When the 13th General Election (GE13) took place in 2013, PR won most of the Chinese-majority parliament seats though it failed to bring down the BN federal government.

THE VOTING BLOC PHENOMENON IN THE 2016 SARAWAK STATE ELECTION

After the 2011 Sarawak State Election, a local-based social movement, "Sarawak for Sarawakians Movement" (abbreviated as S4S Movement), began to rally Sarawakians around the cause of Sarawak autonomy. However, there were a few allegations about the political association and sponsorship of the movement. Among others, its call for rejecting Semenanjung (Peninsular)-based political parties, subtly referring to component parties under PR, had alarmed PR leaders about the hidden hand of the movement.⁶ The movement was more well-received among the Chinese and Dayak youths compared to the Malay-Melanau community. In the 2016 Sarawak State Election (SSE16), some figures in S4S Movement, such as Lina Soo who was the president of the State Reform Party (STAR), contested the elections.⁷ Despite the popularity of the movement, all STAR candidates lost election deposits in the contests.

Besides the S4S Movement, the political scenario of Sarawak in 2016 had also changed due to two other factors. Taib Mahmud had passed on the baton to his successor, Adenan Satem, and PR failed to capture the federal government in GE13. Adenan was a popular leader across the ethnic divide and bravely questioned the UMNO's Malay-centric policy and Islamisation process. On the opposition side, the squabbles between PAS and DAP led PR to be dissolved and repackaged as the Pakatan Harapan (PH) in 2015. PAS was replaced by PAS splinter party, Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH). The main goal of PH remained unchanged, ending the rule of UMNO-led BN, which was seen as a symbol of corruption, cronyism, power abuse and racism.

Table 1: Chinese-majority and mixed seats won by political parties, the number of majority votes and voting rates by each constituency from 2006 to 2016

Constituency	2006				2011				2016			
	Winning party	Majority votes	Turnout (%)**	Winning party	Majority votes	Turnout (%)	Winning party	Majority votes	Turnout (%)	Winning party	Majority votes	Turnout (%)
Chinese-majority seats												
Padungan (N.9)	PKR	1417	60.2	DAP	7884	70.2	DAP	4270	65.5			
Pending (N.10)	DAP	4372	65.1	DAP	7595	72.3	DAP	5012	65.7			
Batu Lintang (N.11)	DAP	3407	57.9	PKR	8381	66.4	PKR	10758	62.7			
Kota Sentosa (N.12)	DAP	531	67.8	DAP	4824	75.4	DAP	10047	67.9			
Batu Kitiang (N.13)*							SUPP	1840	70.1			
Batu Kawah (N.14)	SUPP	576	60.4	DAP	543	70.7	SUPP	2085	70.9			
Repok (N.45)	SUPP	3578	63.0	DAP	2679	72.4	SUPP	943	71.6			
Meradong (N.46)	DAP	4571	67.0	DAP	2687	73.1	SUPP	1516	73.5			
Bukit Assek (N.51)	DAP	408	61.9	DAP	8827	68.8	DAP	4497	66.6			
Dudong (N.52)	SUPP	2504	66.8	DAP	317	74.2	BN (Direct)	2146	73			
Bawang Assan (N.53)	SUPP	263	66.3	SUPP	1808	77.3	BN (Direct)	4131	80.7			
Pelawan (N.54)	SUPP	1664	64.7	DAP	6391	70.6	DAP	4314	70.2			
Kidurong/Tanjung Datu (N.68)*	DAP	3918	65.3	DAP	6930	67.3	DAP	2548	69.2			
Piasau (N.73)	SUPP	1370	54.1	DAP	1190	63.1	SUPP	2112	64.6			
Pujut (N.74)	SUPP	4180	58.7	DAP	3849	64.2	DAP	1579	65.3			
Senadin (N.75)	SUPP	3538	57.7	SUPP	58	66.1	SUPP	3538	65.9			
Statewide			61.9			70.0			70.0			

Note: Calculation of turnout rates are based on the results released by the Election Commission. * Election Commission undertook an exercise of delineation before the 2016 state elections. Under the delineation, Kidurong was amended to Tanjung Batu, and a new seat called Batu Kitiang was created. **The total valid votes divided by the total electorates.

Sources: Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya (2006; 2016); Wikipedia (n.d.)

In 2016, Sarawakian voters entered the state elections in the context aforescribed. Table 1 indicates that BN⁸ or SUPP and PH-DAP remained the two primary choices among Chinese voters. The new party STAR failed to secure a substantial percentage of votes in Chinese seats and generally scored less than 3% of the total votes. Even the independent candidates fared better than the STAR candidates.⁹

In Table 1, PH-DAP failed to retain the 2011 electoral momentum. The voting rates slightly dropped in some seats and waned in the urban Kuching areas, as shown in Table 1. A salient trend was that DAP lost most rural and new urban seats, especially areas catering for a mixed-ethnic population, a substantial number of whom were involved in agriculture and having long-term incumbencies, such as Bawang Assan and Dudong of Sibu district, Senadin of Miri district, and Batu Kawa of Kuching district. In contrast, areas catering for long-established urban communities of these districts remained with DAP and PKR. The traditional large and dense urban Chinese communities in the district capital of Kuching, Sibu, Bintulu and Miri, such as Padungan, Pending, Bukit Assek, Kidurong or Tanjung Datu, and Pujut, continued to favour opposition parties despite suffering a substantial drop in majority votes. These old town areas are usually supported by vibrant commercial activities and are accustomed to opposition politics.

PATTERNS OF PLURALITY VOTING AND THE FRAGMENTED PARTY SYSTEM

The national scenario experienced a drastic change when Sarawak held its 12th State Election in 2021. The political deals authored by BN, PAS and BERSATU at the Sheraton Hotel, dubbed as the “Sheraton Move,” caused the fall of PH as the federal government in February 2020. The successive changes of the federal government in 2018 and 2020 created new federal-state dynamics, resulting in the GPS government abandoning BN in 2018. GPS was under PBB’s leadership, led by Abang Johari, Adenan’s successor. GPS decided not to align with PH, but supported the PN government that toppled the PH government. Within Sarawak, the political landscape in the past few years has gone through significant changes, including the change of chief minister, the birth of new parties and the breakdown of PKR Sarawak due to the sacking and party shifting of PKR state leaders.

The SSE21 was extraordinary as it was held during the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitating adherence to the standard operating procedures (SOPs) for campaigning. The outgoing term of the Sarawak State Legislative Assembly (SLA) ended in June, but the state election was delayed under proclamations of emergencies until after the Melaka State Election was successfully held in

November 2021. Under the SOPs drawn up by the Malaysian Ministry of Health, physical public rallies and seminars in urban areas were forbidden during the campaign period. Door-to-door visits and market walkabouts were restricted in several aspects, including the number of campaign members, physical distancing and duration of visit. With such restrictions, most political parties undertook online political campaigns despite knowing the limits in reaching and mobilising voters. Another setback in political mobilisation was the restriction and discouragement of people’s mobility, resulting in low voting rates statewide, as indicated in Table 2. Travelling became costly when it involved overpriced flight tickets between the towns and cities of Sarawak or between Sarawak and cities outside Sarawak. Though the SOPs had an uneven impact on election campaigning, there was a negative impact on opposition parties like DAP, which relied on urban areas as its main bastion of support.

Table 2: Distribution of votes by winning parties, majority votes and turnout rates in the Chinese constituencies in the SSE21

Constituency	Urban/ Rural	Winning party	Vote polled	Vote share*	Majority vote	Turnout
Kuching division						
Padungan (N.9)	Old urban	DAP	4,686	50.0	1,198	44.8
Pending (N.10)	Old urban	DAP	5,188	39.9	540	43.8
Batu Lintang (N.11)	Old urban	PSB	4,420	35.4	93	42.1
Kota Sentosa (N.12)	Old urban	GPS (SUPP)	5,806	42.2	1,683	48.2
Batu Kitang (N.13)	New urban	GPS (SUPP)	6,307	56.8	4,136	53.3
Batu Kawah (N.14)	New urban	GPS (SUPP)	7,827	69.3	5,393	54.6
Sibu and Sarikei divisions						
Repok (N.45)	Rural	GPS (SUPP)	10,038	72.3	7,308	59.0
Meradong (N.46)	Rural	GPS (SUPP)	6,827	57.2	3,362	65.8
Bukit Assek (N.51)	Old urban	GPS (SUPP)	4,684	34.4	874	48.5
Dudong (N.52)	Rural	GPS (PDP)	9,390	46.1	5,806	58.2
Bawang Assan (N.53)	Rural	PSB	5,952	42.7	913	71.0
Pelawan (N.54)	Old urban	GPS (SUPP)	4,413	27.1	100	47.3
Bintulu and Miri divisions						
Tanjung Batu (N.68)	Old urban	GPS (SUPP)	4,092	35.0	23	51.4
Piasau (N.73)	Old urban	GPS (SUPP)	6,790	66.1	4,988	48.1
Pujut (N.74)	Old urban	GPS (SUPP)	5,558	44.3	1,566	45.5
Senadin (N.75)	New urban	GPS (SUPP)	10,535	61.3	7,591	50.4

Note: *The total votes polled by party divided by the total valid votes

Sources: Attorney General’s Chambers (2021); Tindak Malaysia (2021)

Table 2 contains the election results of Chinese majority constituencies, including the winning parties, their vote share and majority vote, and the turnout rates. SUPP was the biggest winner, bagging most rural and urban seats¹⁰ and managing to secure a majority of votes or over 50% of the vote share in the rural and new urban areas. However, SUPP obtained only a plurality of votes or less than 50% in most old urban seats and lost in three highly urbanised constituencies in Kuching. In Pelawan, SUPP won with a margin of 100 votes, comprising only 27.1% of the total vote share. In Bukit Assek and Tanjung Datu, SUPP got by with one-third of the total votes.

DAP only managed to defend two highly urbanised seats with a slashed majority, namely Padungan and Pending in the Kuching Division. The earned vote share plunged to its lowest point in the past decade. The new local opposition party, PSB, leveraged the incumbency advantage and grabbed two Chinese seats, Batu Lintang and Bawang Assan. See Chee How from PSB only seized 35.4% of the total votes, although Wong Soon Koh did much better with a share of 42.7%. A noteworthy development was the entry of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), a traditionally Dayak-based party, into the battle for the Chinese seat in the state elections. The party candidate, Tiong King Sing, also the Member of Parliament (MP) for Bintulu, claimed victory with a massive majority, but captured only 46.1% of the total votes.

The overall results revealed the rise of local parties in Chinese politics, which campaigned for different versions of the “Sarawak First” discourse. The relatively high number of parties and low vote share of winning parties indicated fragmentation in voting and party system. Table 3 shows the total votes and the percentage of vote share won by three minor parties, namely PSB, PBK and ASPIRASI, to paint a clearer picture of the political fragmentation patterns.

Table 3: Votes polled by PSB, PBK and ASPIRASI and their respective vote shares in the Chinese-majority seats

Name of seat	PSB (Votes)	Vote share (%)	PBK (Votes)	Vote share (%)	ASPIRASI (Votes)	Vote share (%)
Padungan (N.9)	nc	0	930	9.9	193	2.1
Pending (N.10)	1,858	14.3	978	7.5	204	1.6
Batu Lintang (N.11)	4,420	35.4	1,570	12.6	187	1.5
Kota Sentosa (N.12)	2,328	17.0	1,015	7.4	215	1.6
Batu Kitang (N.13)	1,812	16.3	675	6.1	nc	0
Batu Kawah (N.14)	nc	0	756	6.7	133	1.2

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Table 3: (continued)

Name of seat	PSB (Votes)	Vote share (%)	PBK (Votes)	Vote share (%)	ASPIRASI (Votes)	Vote share (%)
Repok (N.45)	nc	0	738	5.3	216	1.6
Meradong (N.46)	3,465	29.0	622	5.2	nc	0
Bukit Assek (N.51)	1,790	13.1	2,598	19.1	209	1.5
Dudong (N.52)	3,584	17.6	1,779	8.7	212	1.0
Bawang Assan (N.53)	5,952	42.7	954	6.8	nc	0
Pelawan (N.54)	3,757	23.0	3,146	19.3	302	1.9
Tanjung Batu (N.68)	1,071	9.2	2,204	18.9	93	0.8
Piasau (N.73)	816	7.9	665	6.5	121	1.2
Pujut (N.74)	1,667	13.3	1,022	8.1	152	1.2
Senadin (N.75)	1,896	11.0	1,023	6.0	nc	0

Note: nc = Not contested

Sources: Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya (2016); Tindak Malaysia (2021)

The SSE21 saw PSB grow into Sarawak’s strongest opposition party. Its origin was a SUPP splinter party, the United People’s Party (UPP), founded by the Bawang Assan state assemblyman, Wong Soon Koh. In the SSE16, the party fielded candidates directly under the ticket of BN, thus called “BN Direct” candidates. Two years later, the party decided to rebrand itself as PSB and stood as an independent entity. In the SSE21, PSB won four seats fielded by incumbents: Bawang Assan and Batu Lintang are Chinese-majority seats located in Sibuluan and Kuching divisions; the other two are Dayak-majority seats, Ba’ Kelalan and Engkilili, located in Limbang and Sri Aman divisions. The party was perceived as a new Sarawak-based multi-ethnic force in the current Sarawak politics.

The other two opposition parties, PBK and ASPIRASI, failed to acquire any seats in the elections. Both parties championed regional state autonomy and also the individual rights of Sarawakians. Despite fighting for a geographically-based identity, PBK and ASPIRASI demonstrated an ethnic dimension in their organisation and election campaigns. Their office bearers and candidates comprised mostly Chinese and Dayaks. The key leaders of the PBK were primarily Chinese, and as shown in Table 3, it fielded candidates in all Chinese-majority seats.¹¹ ASPIRASI, formerly the political party of STAR, was founded by a former state cabinet minister, Patau Rubis, and the current president, Lina Soo. The party contested only 15 seats; 12 of them were Chinese-majority seats. Surprisingly, PBK won a total vote share of 5.7% (Isau 2021; Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya 2021a)

despite its first attempts in most seats, faring much better than ASPIRASI. Table 3 shows that PBK retained election deposits in six seats, four of which were Chinese majority seats, and two were Bidayuh-majority, Opar and Tasik Biru.¹² Voon Lee San, the president of PBK, and Priscilla Lau, the secretary-general, secured their election deposits. On the other hand, ASPIRASI performed poorly and posed no threat to the other contestants.

The following section will examine Batu Lintang and Bukit Assek's contesting parties and voting patterns. It aims to show the noticeable changes in Chinese political inclination between 2016 and 2021 and how the minor parties effectively weakened the mainstream parties' electoral performance, thus facilitating GPS's landslide victory.

CASE STUDIES: BATU LINTANG AND BUKIT ASSEK

The Chinese population of Sarawak are mainly concentrated in urban areas. As the two oldest cities of Sarawak, Kuching and Sibü are home to a sizeable Chinese population, encompassing multiple generations. Although loyal supporters for the opposition parties in the past decade, their support for PH had dwindled as a consequence of the national political chaos prior to the SSE21. Tables 4 and 5 show the voting patterns of Batu Lintang, a state constituency in Kuching; and Bukit Assek, a state constituency in Sibü. Table 4 reveals changes in the voting pattern between SSE16 and SSE21. The trend has changed from majority to plurality voting or from a voting bloc for an opposition party (PH) to patchy support for multiple opposition parties in 2021.

Batu Lintang, a state constituency in Kuching, registered voter demographics by ethnicity as such: Chinese accounted for 85.9% of the total voters, Iban 6.7%, Malay-Melanau 3.3%, Bidayuh 2.3%, Orang Ulu 0.3% and others 1.5%.¹³ The area was previously won by PKR's candidate, See Chee How, but he was sacked by the central PKR after the Sheraton Move. With PKR Sarawak president, Baru Bian, See switched to PSB and contested under PSB. Though See managed to keep the seat on the incumbency advantage, he survived only with 93 votes, a sharp plunge from 5,012 votes in 2016. PKR, an established party, performed only slightly better than PBK. The voting pattern suggested that partisan voting was not the primary motivation for most PKR supporters, and they did not switch their political allegiance to SUPP¹⁴ but to minor parties like PSB and PBK.

Table 4: Vote distribution among parties and candidates for Batu Lintang (N11) in the SSE16 and SSE21

Party	SSE16			SSE21		
	Candidate	Vote	Vote share (%)	Candidate	Vote	Vote share (%)
BN/GPS (SUPP)	Sih Hua Tong	6,373	36.2	Sih Hua Tong	4,327	34.6
PKR	See Chee How	10,758	61.1	Cherishe Ng Phuay Hui	1,823	14.6
PSB	nc	0		See Chee How	4,420	35.4
PBK	nc	0		Voon Lee Shan	1,570	12.6
STAR/ASPIRASI	Lina Soo	331	0.02	Leong Shaow Tung	187	1.5
Majority vote		4,385			93	
Turnout %		62.7			42.1	

Note: nc = Not contested

Sources: Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya (2016); Attorney General’s Chambers (2021); Tindak Malaysia (2021)

Table 5 compares the election results of the Bukit Assek seat in the SSE16 and SSE21. As a Chinese-majority seat, Bukit Assek comprises 89.8% Chinese, 5.6% Iban, 4% Malay-Melanau, and 0.6% others.¹⁵ Table 5 shows a voting pattern similar to Table 4, with a dominant winner in 2016 and plurality voting in 2021, in which the votes were spread across four major parties. The winner of 2021, SUPP, only captured 34.4% of the vote share, a slight drop in vote share and number of votes from 2016. DAP candidate, Irene Chang, failed to hold the seat despite having the incumbency advantage. She only bagged 3,810 votes, a sharp decline from 11,392 votes gained in 2016. Similar to the voting in Bukit Lintang, DAP supporters streamed to PBK and PSB, and ASPIRASI’s influence was insignificant.

Table 5: Vote distribution among parties and candidates for Bukit Assek (N51) in the SSE16 and SSE21

Party	SSE16			SSE21		
	Candidate	Vote	Vote share (%)	Candidate	Vote	Vote share (%)
BN/GPS (SUPP)	Chieng Buong Toon	6,895	36.5	Chieng Jin Ek	4,684	34.4
DAP	Irene Chang	11,392	60.3	Irene Chang	3,810	28.0
PBK	nc	0		Priscilla Lau	2,598	19.1
PSB	nc	0		Ting Kee Nguan	1,790	13.1

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Table 5: (continued)

Party	SSE16			SSE21		
	Candidate	Vote	Vote share (%)	Candidate	Vote	Vote share (%)
STAR/ ASPIRASI	Moh Hiong King	374	0.02	Jess Lau	209	1.9
Majority vote		4,497			874	
Turnout %		66.6			49.3	

Note: nc = Not contested

Sources: Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya (2016); Attorney General's Chambers (2021); Tindak Malaysia (2021)

SUSTAINABILITY OF LOCAL-BASED POLITICAL FORCES AND NEW DEVELOPMENT

Overall, PSB has emerged as an effective local-based political force that possesses the capacity to defeat the once-mighty-DAP in either direct or indirect fights. In some seats, PSB and PBK significantly reduced the votes gained by DAP, allowing the victory of SUPP. Their emergence capitalised on voters' distrust of PH and GPS in safeguarding their interests through balancing federal and state relationships or pursuing institutional reforms. If PH fails to project the chance of winning the federal government and GPS continues to be associated with corruption and patronage politics, the political fragmentation among the Chinese will probably persist. This also means that a consolidated PH stands a chance to revitalise voters' support for PH, which might spell the decline of PSB and PBK.

The regionalism narratives, either Sarawak autonomy or independence, were appealing or acceptable to a substantial number of voters in view of a weak national opposition and scepticism towards established political parties. Some believe that only "independent" local political parties could stand to reject Peninsular Malay-Muslim ethno-patronage politics. For them, PH and GPS have proven to fail in lifting unfair and exclusive policies of the federal government, therefore leaving voters with no hope of fair play between federal, Sarawak, and its ethnic groups. Consequently, the decision to support minor parties advocating for separatism can be read as strategic voting of the regional minority who feel deprived of their rights by the long-term biased policy implemented by the state and federal governments.

The sustainability of PSB and PBK also depends on their internal structure. Their campaigns revealed that their mobilisation strategies and election resources are personality-based. Personality-based popularity, especially for strong incumbents,

enables opposition leaders to navigate fierce rivalry against resource-rich competitors. On the other hand, personality politics tends to breed party-hopping, which places parties' futures or institutional development at risk of uncertainty. The leading figures of PSB and PBK, such as Wong Soon Koh, Baru Bian, Voon Lee San and Priscilla Lau, all possess party-switching experience and still win substantial votes. Political instability and fragmentation might be exacerbated when personal leadership is more potent than party identification.

Under the first-past-the-post electoral system, minority parties like PSB and PBK gained a disproportionately small share of seats. For instance, PSB won only 5% of seats despite gaining nearly 19% of votes and PBK won none despite winning over 5%. On the other hand, the incumbent government coalition swept over 90% of the seats with only 61% of the total valid votes. The system will continue to reward GPS with a disproportionately bigger share of seats as it continues to win majority votes. This means that the representation for minority opposition parties will be undermined in the state assembly if the political fragmentation persists.

A surprise, probably overlooked by most political analysts, is the evident increase of female politicians in the current political development. PSB, PBK and ASPIRASI fielded 10, 13 and 6 female candidates respectively, a total of 29 in the SSE21. Though none of them was elected, the experience in the political frontline is essential in nurturing future women leaders. Only PBB and DAP fielded female candidates in their stronghold seats among all the parties, thus contributing to making women state assembly representatives. Other established parties, including SUPP, Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS), PDP and PAS, have yet to field any female candidate in most elections over the past decade. With the increased participation of women as contestants in elections, the prospect of gender issues such as gender equality and women's representation in politics and the economy would stand a better chance to be included in the parties' manifestos.

CONCLUSION

The ethno-patronage system and power struggle at the national level has profoundly impacted Chinese political behaviour in Sarawak. About 10 years ago, when the national opposition coalition unveiled the potential to take down the federal government, the Chinese voters in Sarawak seized the opportunity to support their expansion in Sarawak. They leveraged on national strength in the hope of ending the rule of overdue strongman politicians in Sarawak. If BN represented a model of political integration among the old ethnic elites, PR or PH represented a channel of national political integration for the Chinese opposition forces in Sarawak.

However, with the abrupt end of the PH administration in 2020, national politics became a power game of a few Malay elites at the centre, who decided on the prime ministership and the government of the day. The precarious central leadership has not only lost its role as a kingmaker of the Sarawak government, as it did in the 1980s and 1990s, but relied on the parliamentary support of Sarawak parties for its federal government position. Many former PH supporters began associating the central leadership with corruption and political instability and blaming them for ethnic and regional inequality.

The current political fragmentation reflects the distinctive feature of Sarawak Chinese minority politics compared to Chinese politics found in Peninsular Malaysia. The recent elections witnessed the return of personal politics and a prevalent distrust of established parties, hence generating the proliferation of young local-based political parties. Meanwhile, regional identity could be easily reignited to overshadow ethnic identity and generate a collective drive for geographical-based interests and belonging. The recent development indicates that a growing number of voters are prepared to opt for a third viable political vehicle if they feel that mainstream political parties and their approaches do not represent their interests.

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NOTES

1. *Bumiputera* is a Malay word literally means "son of the soil." In the Malaysian Constitution, Malays and other indigenous people are recognised as *bumiputera*.
2. Ethnic Chinese in Sarawak are descendants of Chinese immigrants who mostly came to Sarawak between the middle of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th century. They are not given the status of *bumiputera*. In Malaysia, mainstream parties such as the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU) and PBB specify ethnicity in their membership.
3. The Barisan Alternatif was a political pact of four parties, DAP, PAS, Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM) and a newly formed Parti Keadilan, led by the

- President of Parti Keadilan, Anwar Ibrahim, who was sacked from the post of Deputy Prime Minister in 1998 by the then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.
4. PAS was widely perceived as religiously extremist, not just by the non-Muslims but also by the Sarawakian Muslims. The cooperation of DAP and PAS had resulted in the loss of DAP supporters and cost DAP massive losses in the elections (Martinez 2002). Moreover, the terrorist attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City on 11 September 2001 reinforced negative perceptions towards PAS.
 5. The SNAP representative for Engkilili claimed his support for BN after he won the seat.
 6. Based on the information gathered from Ngu's field trips between 2016 and 2018, the S4S movement did not appear to have a central leadership but dispersed into groups scattered in various cities and towns of Sarawak. The movement was not monolithic, and certain pockets had ties with different political parties and personalities.
 7. Lina Soo and others did not receive blessing from the key leader of S4S movement, Peter John Jaban accused them of exploiting the popularity of S4S for their own agenda (Mohd Noor Affandi 2016).
 8. For Bawang Assan and Dudong, they contested directly under BN instead of SUPP.
 9. STAR fielded 11 candidates and 36 individuals contested as Independents.
 10. Refer to the preceding section for the discussion of urban and rural categorisation. This paper takes only Repok, Meradong, Dudong and Bawan Assan as rural areas as a large part of these areas are not covered by the city and municipal governments plus listed by the Election Committee as poor 4G coverage areas (Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya 2021b).
 11. PBK fielded 73 candidates and 25 of them were Chinese. PBK did not contest in seven seats won by PBB and two seats won by PRS.
 12. In the early reporting, several local newspapers claimed PBK had retained deposit for seven seats. The number was then corrected to six.
 13. The election demographics data was derived from the figures published for the previous state elections. However, with the implementation of automatic voter registration on 31 December 2022, the voter demographics has changed substantially. According to the recently published Census 2020 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022, p. 103) Chinese comprised 64.2% of the total citizen population of Batu Lintang, Iban 15.3%, Malays 8.7%, Bidayuh 7.8% and Melanau 1%.
 14. The total votes gained by SUPP plunged from 7,442 to 4,327.
 15. The Malaysia Census 2020 (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2022, p. 106) shows that Chinese comprised 44.9% of the total citizen population of Bukit Assek, Iban 36.7%, Melanau 8.8%, Malays 8.3% and Bidayuh 0.3%.

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