

## REPORT 6

### *Sarawak: One Election, Many Contests*

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#### **Introduction**

In May 2013, Malaysia held its 13<sup>th</sup> General Election (GE13) which saw contests for 505 state and 222 parliamentary seats. All the states of the federation held simultaneous state level elections except for Sarawak which only held parliamentary elections for its 31 constituencies since state and parliamentary elections are not run simultaneously in the state. Sarawak's state elections were last held in 2011.

The country's 12<sup>th</sup> parliament was dissolved on 3 April. Nominations were held on 20<sup>th</sup> April with polling on 5<sup>th</sup> May. The formal election campaign period lasted 15 days although campaigning had begun well in advance of parliament's dissolution. This was certainly the case for Sarawak where campaigning and preparations never really ended after the April 2011 state elections. They just continued, albeit in a low-key mode, and slowly intensified until it peaked in May 2013.

There were keen contests throughout the country, a phenomenon that was similarly replicated in Sarawak. As a current affairs commentator noted, the elections

‘was a memorable one for the heat it generated, the rhetoric that went into it, the wild accusations and counter-accusations, the pornography videos of the so-called sexual exploits of an opposition leader or someone who resembled him, the lies uttered to discredit opposition leaders, the Brutus's who stabbed their erstwhile friends in the back, the large numbers of party hoppers, the turncoats, and above all, the large amount of public money waster on handouts to buy votes’ (D' Cruz 2013).

Things were little different in Sarawak, the exception being that the major video produced for the electoral contest there did not feature any sex but a lust for money and land grabs.

Interestingly, GE13 in Sarawak turned out to be more than 31 parliamentary contests between the governing Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalitions. The election also

revealed multi-layered contests for power and dominance within the BN: between the renegade five Sarawak People's Democratic Party elected representatives (SPDP5) and their party president William Mawan; between sacked Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS) member and former State Deputy Minister Larry Sng and his party president James Masing. Within PR, there were contests between a rump BN-friendly Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) bloc that called itself the Dayak Advisory Council (DAC) and the PKR Sarawak state leadership; and between the top PKR, Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) state leadership over the allocation of seats and candidates.

GE13 also showcased a contest between the government's overwhelming media propaganda and a guerilla radio station; of rich and powerful vested interests versus the limited resources of a ragtag bunch of well-intentioned activists bent on change and reforms. Over and above these multi-layered contests were the normal bitter disputes during the formal election campaign between candidates who were selected by their respective party leaderships and those who were dropped from party lists. It was easily the most keenly contested election in the state since the 'Ming Court'<sup>1</sup> snap election of 1987. And for a time, it seemed that the result would favour the opposition PR.

This paper thus aims to encapsulate the salient events and issues of the GE13 experience in Sarawak. It also aims to draw out the implications of the whole contest, not only for the winners and losers of the parliamentary contest but also for national politics, for Sarawak and the future. But first, a discussion of the GE13 results for Sarawak.

## **The Electoral Outcome**

The intensity of the contests for Sarawak's pool of 31 parliamentary seats was clearly evident when all constituencies were contested for the first time in the state's recent electoral history by a total of 82 candidates from the BN and PR coalitions, the State Reform Party (STAR) and the newly established Sarawak Worker's Party (SWP). In total, nine political parties and a smattering of independents contested the polls. Of these, the BN fielded 31 candidates (Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu [PBB]: 14, Sarawak United Peoples' Party [SUPP]: 7,

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<sup>1</sup> The Ming Court affair was an ultimately unsuccessful internal BN political rebellion engineered by former CM Abdul Rahman Yakub against his nephew, then CM Abdul Taib Mahmud in March 1987.

PRS: 6, SPDP: 4)<sup>2</sup> as did PR (PKR: 15, DAP: 11, PAS: 5). The other two parties, STAR and SWP contested in seven and six seats respectively while there were seven independents (Borneo Post, 6.5.13; Berita Harian, 7.5.13).

Long considered a safe deposit of the BN, Sarawak did not disappoint. Of the 31 parliamentary constituencies, the Sarawak BN won 25 seats while PR won six. PBB won all 14 of the seats it contested as did PRS (six) and SPDP (four). The biggest loser was SUPP which lost six out of the seven seats it contested. Of these seats lost to PR, five were won by the DAP (i.e. Bandar Kuching, Stampin, Sarikei, Sibul and Lanang) and one by PKR (i.e. Miri). All these six seats that were lost by SUPP were urban seats. All rural seats remained in the hands of the BN coalition.

The PR coalition's win of six parliamentary seats (out of 31) was the largest haul of seats it had won in a long time. It equaled the tally of parliamentary seats won by the opposition in 1990 (Hazis 2012). Clearly, the Sarawak BN emerged worse off post-GE13. And yet, paradoxically, PBB, the mainstay of the Sarawak BN, emerged stronger than ever within the federal BN when it found itself the second largest party of the BN coalition in parliament (with its 14 parliamentary seats)<sup>3</sup> when the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and GERAKAN, traditional major partners of UMNO, were soundly defeated by the opposition on the peninsula. This result, along with the remaining 11 seats held by other Sarawak coalition members meant that CM Abdul Taib Mahmud (who also heads the Sarawak BN) emerged as a serious power-broker within the federal BN coalition, with the ability to make or break the BN's UMNO-led government's parliamentary mandate.

Out of a total electorate of 1,083,865 voters in Sarawak, a total of 827,299 voters cast their votes on 5 May giving the state a voter turnout 76.32 percent. Of this number, the BN coalition won a total of 481,038 votes (58.1 percent) while the PR coalition won a total of 304,508 votes cast (36.8 percent). Independent candidates won a total of 13,981 votes (1.7 percent) while SWP and STAR won 15,630 (1.88 percent) and 2070 votes (0.25 percent)

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<sup>2</sup> PBB stands for Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu, the mainstay party of the BN coalition in Sarawak. SUPP is the acronym for the Sarawak United Peoples' Party.

<sup>3</sup> UMNO won 88 parliamentary seats and emerged stronger than ever within the BN coalition despite the coalition losing seven seats to PR in the overall election tally. This fact was alluded to by Kessler who observed that 'an electorally weakened Umno emerged politically even more dominant than it had been before. While still embattled in the broader political arena, Umno was delivered a dominant position within the parliament, ruling coalition and government' (Kessler, 16.6.13).

respectively. There were 9976 spoilt and rejected votes (1.2 percent) (Berita Harian, 7.5.13).

When these GE13 results are compared to all four recent state and parliamentary elections held since 2004, what emerges is a yo-yo pattern of inevitable decline in the electoral influence of the BN in Sarawak. From a high of 64.6 percent of the vote in 2004, the BN share of the vote declined to 58.1 percent in 2013, albeit with some ups and downs along the way. Conversely, electoral support for the PR component parties has been rising steadily throughout the state. From 17.2 percent in 2004, it has risen to a high of 36.8 percent in 2013 on a significantly larger turnout of 76.3 percent of the electorate. (See Table 1).

**Table 1: Votes and Seats Won by Parties Contesting Parliamentary and State Elections, Sarawak, 2004-2013<sup>4</sup> (Total & Percentages)**

Election (P/S) <sup>5</sup>	BN (%)	BN Seats	PR (%)	PR Seats	Other Parties (%)	Other Party Seats	Indpt (%)	Indpt Seats	Total Votes Cast (%)	Total Seats	Total Eligible Voters
2004 (P)	278,919 (64.6)	27	74,086 (17.2)	1	34,849 (8.1)	0	35,682 (8.3)	0	431,531 (62)	28	695,969
2006 (S)	341,587 (61.8)	62	131,383 (23.8)	7	51,459 (9.3)	1	18,535 (3.4)	1	552,350 (63.2)	71	873,703
2008 (P)	336,562 (64.2)	30	152,593 (29.1)	1	8615 (1.6)	0	26,473 (5)	0	533,155 (65.1)	31	819,274
2011 (S)	372,379 (55.4)	55	261,666 (38.9)	15	18,558 (2.8)	0	20,064 (3)	1	672,667 (69.7)	71	979,796
2013 (P)	481,038 (58.1)	25	304,508 (36.8)	6	17,700 (2.1)	0	13,981 (1.7)	0	827,299 (76.3)	31	1,083,865

Source: Election Commission Malaysia (various issues)

This situation, of the slow but steady rise of PR vis-à-vis the slow and steady decline of the BN is also mirrored in the 23 rural parliamentary seats in the state which has long been the stable vote-bank of the BN.<sup>6</sup> (See Table 2). Since 2004, the PR share of the rural vote has grown from 0.5 percent to 24.5 percent (2013); a huge achievement given the serious human, organizational and financial resource challenges that PR faces.<sup>7</sup> The BN's share of the rural vote has fluctuated, dependent upon the number of seats that are contested since often the BN has won rural seats by default when no opposition candidates are fielded as was the case in

<sup>4</sup> Figures do not completely add up to 100 percent as spoilt and unreturned votes are negligible and thus ignored.

<sup>5</sup> Refers either to Parliament (P) or State (S) Elections.

<sup>6</sup> Generally, most parliamentary constituencies in Sarawak are rural except for the following seven large urban constituencies, namely Petrajaya, Bandar Kuching, Stampin, Sibul, Lanang, Bintulu and Miri. For consistency in allowing comparisons across state and parliamentary election results, I have classified and included all state seats under these parliamentary constituencies as being urban as well.

<sup>7</sup> Campaigning in Sarawak is very challenging. Constituencies, especially rural ones are huge. Communities are very remote and far apart. Transport links are poor with river transport and logging tracks often being the only way to access rural villages. As well, current practice demands that campaigners bring food and drink (including liquor) to feed the whole village when visiting. Failing to do so only jeopardises a candidate's chances at being elected. Then, there are costs involved in paying villagers to put up party flags, distribute flyers, transport voters to the polling stations, to act as polling agents and counting agents on Election Day, and etc. Hence, campaigning costs soar.

2004 (six seats), 2006 (two seats), and 2008 (five seats). The 2011 State and 2013 Parliamentary elections were however fully contested.

**Table 2: Rural Vote in State and Parliamentary Elections in Sarawak, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2013 (Total Votes and Percentage Share)**

Election (P/S) <sup>8</sup>	BN (%)	PR (%)	Total Rural Votes Cast (%)
2004 (P)	152,549 (71)	1035 (0.5)	215,115
2006 (S)	214,946 (67.2)	23,714 (7.4)	319,625
2008 (P)	189,948 (72)	38,815 (14.8)	263,085
2011 (S)	241,645 (64.9)	90,317 (24.3)	241,185
2013 (P)	335,829 (74.1)	110,978 (24.5)	452,865

*Source:* Election Commission Malaysia (various issues) (derived).

However, to get a better and more nuanced appreciation of the issues that influenced the outcome of the GE13 results along with their implications, one has to look at the various issues that dominated the run-up to and during the polls. After all, many of the issues of GE13 did not crop up spontaneously. Rather, they were unresolved issues that had their roots in earlier years.

### **Salient Electoral Issues as GE13 Backdrop**

The first key issue that featured as a major backdrop to the GE13 was that of the alienation of NCR land ostensibly for logging, commercial agricultural (oil palm) development and dam building. By late 2010, there were over 150 NCR disputes pending in the High Court affecting thousands of natives from numerous villages (Pro-Regenwald n.d.). As well, the many judgments in favour of their native plaintiffs which re-affirmed the constitutional sanctity of NCR land meant that most NCR lands, whether under dispute or not, were affected one way or another by the outcome of the cases. Similarly, affected was the hitherto practice of handing out provisional licenses for the commercial exploitation of NCR lands by the State Government.

A second key issue that featured as a backdrop to the GE13 was that of the Chief Minister and his political-economic cronies. For some time now, there have been serious allegations of corruption and abuse of power leveled against the Chief Minister by the political opposition, various internet websites like Sarawak Report and international environmental organizations li

<sup>8</sup> Refers either to Parliament (P) or State (S) Elections.

ke the Bruno Manser Fonds. Although the Chief Minister has strenuously denied all such allegations, the evidence indicates that his family has become extremely wealthy over the years and that companies linked to his family and close relatives have a superlative ability to snag a major share of lucrative government contracts. The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) began investigating the Chief Minister's alleged irregularities in June 2011 but has not made much progress in their investigations thus far (Malay Mail Online, 20.7.13).

A third major issue was that of religious freedom, or rather the lack of it. When a ban was placed in 2007 on the use of the word 'Allah' in the Malay version of the Catholic monthly magazine, The Herald, the Catholic Church took the government to court. After the High Court ruled in favour of the Catholic Church in late December 2009, various churches around the country were fire-bombed and mosques vandalized (Al-Arabiya News, 16.1.10). The situation was not helped when in 2011, the Home Ministry denied entry to '5,000 bibles printed in the Malay language that had been imported from Indonesia' (Malaysian Insider, 9.3.11) by the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF) for use by Christians in East Malaysia who worship predominantly in the national language.

A fourth core issue that featured as the GE13 backdrop was that of poverty and inequality. Since Sarawak's economy is precipitated on massive resource extraction and primary commodity-based industries, the economy has seen significant wealth creation but one based on a pattern of resource exhaustion and environmental degradation with significant affiliated impacts upon local communities. Hence, although this economic dynamism and growth pattern have reduced poverty and hardcore poverty levels dramatically over the years, it has not eliminated it. Instead, Sarawak's pattern of development has seen persistent poverty and rising inequality amidst the emergence of a small *nouveaux riche* crony-capitalist class closely associated with the state's political elite.

A final issue, but one that played a major role in shoring up support for the BN was that of developmental handouts. In the run-up to GE13, 'benevolent' government allocations under various Malaysia schemes and 'politics of development' announcements saw the distribution of billions of ringgit of development funds to the people but under the auspices of the BN. While strongly condemned by the opposition, the BN cast these handouts as reflective of a 'caring government'.

Principally, these five key spilled over into and influenced the outcome of the 2013 general elections. Seen together, all these issues pointed to the continued lack of political and economic reform in the country by both sides of the political divide despite the electorate's desire for change.

It is to these issues and how they impacted upon the respective campaigns of the PR and BN in GE13 that we now discuss. We begin however by reviewing the organizational preparations of the respective parties contesting GE13 in Sarawak.

## **The 2013 General Election in Sarawak**

### *The Disorganized PR Campaign Preparations*

The PR campaign for GE13 began long before parliament was dissolved. In fact, buoyed by their large win in 2011, the opposition coalition never stopped campaigning but just carried on working throughout 2011 and 2012. PKR was led by Baru Bian, a prominent NCR case lawyer. DAP was led by Wong Ho Leng, a Sibu-based lawyer while PAS was led by retired civil servant, Haji Adam Ahid.

Early on, it was decided that all of the 31 parliamentary seats would be contested by PR to ensure that the BN did not win any seats unopposed on nomination day as they had done on many previous occasions. Generally, it was also decided that all parties would contest in the seats that they were strongest in, namely the DAP in urban Chinese-majority areas, PKR in native rural-based Dayak- and urban/semi-urban Malay-Melanau majority seats and PAS in rural/semi-rural Malay-Melanau Muslim majority seats. This meant that the DAP would basically contest a minimum of six parliamentary seats having a majority of Chinese voters; PAS would contest about five of the eight Malay-Melanau majority seats and PKR would contest the remaining 15 Dayak- and Malay-majority seats. However, this meant that there were about five mixed seats in which no ethnic community had a clear majority. And it was over these seats that DAP and PKR disagreed and haggled over unceasingly up until Nomination Day.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> More about this intra-PR differences later.

PKR's GE13 operational strategy was to have a two-tiered approach. In the first tier, they concentrated their resources on a core group of about eight key focus seats (namely Limbang, Baram, Hulu Rejang, Selangau, Saratok, Lubok Antu, Sri Aman and Batang Lupar) that they had a very good chance of winning or at least putting up a very good contest against the BN. The second tier would see PKR put up token challenges in all other seats given their weak organizational structure and lack of resources in those areas. For the DAP, it was more straightforward. With their organizational coherence, they campaigned to win all or as many of the seats they contested. PAS being relatively new to Sarawak were realistic about their slim chances of success. For them, it was a question of working to cut BN majorities and to make as much inroads into the Malay-Melanau Muslim-majority seats they contested so as to set up electoral bases from which to launch future contests. In other words, by apportioning out seats among themselves, there would not be any intra-PR contests which would split the opposition vote (as per decisions by the PR federal leadership). PR also planned to present themselves as a coherent and viable opposition front with each party of the coalition focusing on winning their seats. At least, that was the plan.

The reality was different. Because of its ethnic base and organizational strength in relation to both PKR and PAS in Sarawak, DAP wanted to contest all the Chinese- and mixed-majority seats since it viewed itself as having the best chance of winning those seats. This meant that the DAP wanted to contest 12-15 seats, many of which overlapped with that of PKR. Seat negotiations did not go well. As in 2011, the Sarawak PR partnership between DAP and PKR broke down. Instead of a unified front, DAP state leader Wong Ho Leng and his Deputy Chong Chieng Jen squabbled publicly with PKR state leader Baru Bian over issues of policy and election preparations.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, while PKR Sarawak was empowered to enter into negotiations with DAP Sarawak over seat allocations it was not empowered to finalise decisions made since all PKR decisions required the ultimate endorsement of the PKR Central Leadership. This was not the case for DAP Sarawak which viewed itself as autonomous from the Central DAP leadership. Hence, there was much frustration on both sides that ultimately led to the breakdown of seat

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<sup>10</sup> Bad blood and mistrust erupted publicly when Wong Ho Leng announced a PR shadow cabinet for Sarawak soon after the 2011 state elections that supposedly had the endorsement of the collective PR leadership in Sarawak. After PKR supremo Anwar Ibrahim chided Wong saying that the shadow cabinet was merely a DAP list, Baru Bian publicly denied ever endorsing the shadow cabinet citing that he was not at the said meeting (Lee 2011). This muddied relations between both parties.



negotiations. It was ultimately left to the PR Central Leadership to sort out. But even here, the process stalled since DAP Sarawak, being autonomous, refused to accept the mandate of its Central Leadership and that of the PR Central Leadership. It ultimately affected seat negotiations and left the allocation of parliamentary seats in the state undecided until the eleventh hour despite many attempts to overcome the impasse (Borneo Post, 19.9.11; 8.2.12; 30.4.12; 13.4.13).

This delay in finalizing seat allocations had a further knock-on effect of disrupting and even undermining the electoral preparations of all the candidates who were supposedly standing in seats with overlapping claims like that of Sri Aman, Stampin, Miri, Mas Gading and Mambong. Indeed, all these seats were only decided in the last week and some merely 24 hours before Nomination Day! Hence, although PKR and DAP had candidates for Sri Aman, Stampin, Miri, Mas Gading and Mambong, their campaign preparations were very patchy, uncoordinated and inconsistent since none of them knew if they were standing or not! This delay in seat allocation similarly also affected fundraising efforts of these candidates as all found it difficult to justify fundraising if they were not selected as candidates for their target seats. One PKR candidate, Boniface Willie who was selected to stand for Mas Gading, even had his candidacy dis-endorsed by PKR just one day before Nomination after further last-minute horse trading with the DAP over seats (Interview, PKR State Liaison Committee member, 4 May 2013).<sup>11</sup>

Complicating matters was Sarawak PKR's internal problems which saw serious factional splits involving a rebellious Dayak faction that called itself the Dayak Advisory Council (DAC) and a Kuching-based Malay faction. Both these factions were not amenable to or unhappy about the leadership of Baru Bian, an Orang Ulu. Hence, it was not unusual when both factions challenged the selection of PKR candidates by the *Majlis Pimpinan Negeri* (State Leadership Council) and even made independent press statements that were contrary to party policy. They also undermined the leadership of Baru Bian through their own whispering campaigns within the party. Still, they did have valid grouses; key being that Baru Bian was not sufficiently consultative or inclusive of factional interests in the party.

Also undermining electoral preparations within PKR Sarawak was their strange inability to

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<sup>11</sup> This PKR member requested anonymity for our discussions about PKR's performance during GE13.

raise funds for their overall campaign. The party only held a few local fundraising events, mainly dinners. Apparently, these dinners were loss-making affairs as rural villagers did not have much excess cash to finance dinners let alone finance the party's election campaign. Nor did the party even seriously attempt to raise funds from their approximately 25,000 members via small monthly subscriptions. Instead, many of the PKR candidates had to draw upon their own personal funds or looked to the PKR Central leadership or key local party sympathizers in Kuching and Kuala Lumpur to provide the relevant funds for their campaign. The PKR Central Leadership was also not very forthcoming with election funds for the Sarawak campaign owing to financial demands from the rest of the country as well as the potential returns of investing in 'less winnable' Sarawak seats compared to 'more winnable' seats in other states. Consequently, PKR Sarawak's preparations both before and during the election campaign proper were badly hampered. And election campaigns in Sarawak are prohibitively expensive given large constituencies, dispersed longhouses and poor transportation links. Without sufficient funds, travel into the interior was inhibited. Similarly, party materials and flags could not be printed, meetings not organized, gifts and electoral mementos not produced, transport (boats, cars and vans) for voters could not be hired, and food and drink allowances for PKR Polling Agents, Counting Agents (PACA) on Election Day could not be organized for lack of finance (Interview, PKR State Liaison Committee Member, 25 July 2013).

The DAP however had a rather different approach to their campaign preparations. Fresh from their big state seat wins in 2011, they enthusiastically carried on organizing, fundraising and holding *ceramahs* (group meetings) throughout key areas in the state. One of their first major internal priorities post-2011 was a review of their party's hitherto organizational strategy of only organizing and operating in Chinese-majority areas. In a series of closed-door meetings, they endorsed the decision into expanding into native Dayak-majority areas in an effort to expand their party's influence and to shore up the strength of the PR coalition. Fully aware that they were the dominant party of the PR coalition in Sarawak, they rightfully felt that it fell upon them to lead the campaign for change. Except that the DAP did not have many capable or publicly recognizable non-Chinese candidates to which they could depend upon to lead it into expanding into Dayak-areas. Nor was the party leadership, given its deep antipathy towards PKR and its leadership, in any mood to discuss strategy or collaborate with PKR in its expansion plans. In other words, DAP Sarawak went forward on its own. After attracting a few current and former PKR members into joining the party, the DAP set up the

Dayak Consultative Council (DAP/DCC) to assist the party in venturing into Dayak areas (Anthony 2011; Malaysia Chronicle, 18.12.12). DAP Branches were set up in various semi-rural and rural areas, many of which already had PKR Branches and potential candidates. The DAP/DCC soon announced their intention to contest parliamentary seats in various Dayak-majority areas like Mas Gading, Mambong, Bintulu, Serian, Mukah, Kapit, Sri Aman, and Lawas. This only led to confusion and angst at the local level with various PKR Branches having Dayak-majorities protesting that their electoral efforts were being undermined by their own coalition partners. As well, there were objections on the basis of prejudice and ethnicity. Apparently, some Dayaks did not want the Chinese DAP to be their ‘trustees’, preferring instead to run their own affairs. Others feared disunity and dilution of their political impact. While still others cited previous negative inter-ethnic experiences. As noted by Anthony (2011), ‘Some Dayak felt that the socio-economic gap between Dayak and Chinese is not conducive to their working together. Many Dayak expressed bad past experience of working and collaborating with Chinese. Most commonly cited example is SUPP sidelining of Dayak and riding on Dayak vote and with very little “what is it in me” given to Dayak’. This only added friction to the already difficult relationship between both the DAP and PKR.

As in PKR, factionalism within the DAP, especially its Miri Branch threatened to undermine their electoral efforts there. The DAP candidate of choice for the Miri parliamentary seat, Lim Su Kien, was someone closely aligned to state DAP Secretary Chong Chieng Jen. He was unfortunately strongly opposed by many party members from the local branch, including the local DAP assemblyman for Senadin, Fong Pau Teck. Many publicly protested and criticized the Sarawak DAP leadership for their choice of Lim. Consequently, six of the local ringleaders were sacked from the party without due process or even a ‘show cause letter’ causing a major split which threatened the electoral chances of any DAP candidate to capture the Miri seat. This not only raised serious questions about the DAP’s chances in winning Miri but also cast doubts over the DAP’s commitment to its own principles of capability, accountability and transparency (CAT) (FZ.Com, 18.3.13; FMT, 25.4.13a). Outsiders not privy to the internal workings of the DAP however perceived in this episode a finality to the long-standing power struggle within the Sarawak DAP between factions aligned to either Wong Ho Leng or Chong Chen Jen with the result being in Chong’s favour. Wong had by this time been diagnosed with a serious brain tumour and had all but retired from active politics (The Star Online, 12.1.13).

Unlike PKR Sarawak, DAP Sarawak, being urban-based and rooted in the Chinese community, had access to funds. And also unlike PKR Sarawak, they fundraised systematically, consistently and with great creativity throughout the months before the election. Nearly every DAP function (especially *ceramahs*) whether at state- or local-level became a fundraising opportunity among their members and the middle-classes crowds who attended in droves. As well, there were many disgruntled Chinese businesses who readily but secretly contributed large sums of cash towards the DAP's Sarawak campaign. Hence, flush with funds, the DAP was even able to place large orders for soft toys (like their especially popular 'Ubah' Hornbill) and other election paraphernalia which they then sold in party functions to finance their campaign. Indeed, unlike PKR Sarawak, DAP Sarawak's fundraising efforts were organized practically on a commercial basis, i.e. to make more money to pump into their electoral campaign.

PAS's preparations were low-key. Fully cognizant of the fact that they did not really have the electoral support among Sarawakians to mount any serious challenge to the BN, PAS preferred to concentrate on mobilizing its members to campaign house-to-house in their allocated Malay-Melanau Muslim seats of Batang Sadong, Tanjong Manis, Igan, Julau and Sibuti (The Star Online, 14.4.13). And to their credit, they visited villages and covered ground voluntarily. However, they clashed with PKR over the Kota Samarahan, Julau and Mukah seats with the same outcome whereby preparations by both opposition parties for this seat were hampered and ultimately undermined, with only themselves to blame. Unable to sort out their disagreement at the state level, the decision of PR candidates for these three seats was left to the PR Central Leadership in KL. It was only sorted out a few days before Nomination Day. Kota Samarahan and Mukah went to PAS at the expense of the local PKR candidate while Julau went to PKR at the expense of PAS candidate.

Complicating matters for all the component parties of PR was the fact that few of them pooled their resources or worked closely together to support each other's electoral campaign. The exception perhaps was in the parliamentary seat of Miri. There, once it was finally known a day before Nomination Day that the seat was being allocated to PKR, the PKR candidate, Dr Michael Teo had to scramble to get his campaign going. But although he had ample financial resources, he did not have much of a party organizational machinery to back his campaign. Luckily for him, the DAP assemblyman Fong Pau Teck came to his assistance when he brought his DAP party machinery from Pujut and drew in other DAP members to

assist Dr Michael Teo's campaign. The only other evident form of cooperation was when the top leadership of PR campaigned together in key constituencies at major joint-party ceramahs so as to maximize their time and energies during the short campaign period. But to a large extent, it was a case of all PR component parties and candidates being left to their own devices, more so when one party lost out in seat allocations. In such cases, it was often a case of a complete boycott of the electoral campaign by the losing PR component party to the detriment of the PR coalition partner that was finally allocated the seat (e.g. Mas Gading, Kota Samarahan, Mambong, Sri Aman, and Julau ). Even intra-party factions from both DAP and PKR abandoned the party's electoral campaign when their candidates were not picked to contest in the allocated seats.

Despite their apparent disunity, what PR did have going strongly in its favour in the run-up to the GE13 polls was the role played by the investigative journalism website Sarawak Report (SR) and Radio Free Sarawak (RFS), both run by Clare Rewcastle-Brown based in London.<sup>12</sup> Drawing on extensive research and numerous whistle-blower reports, SR exposed numerous cases of alleged corruption and abuse of power within the administration of CM Abdul Taib Mahmud involving development tenders, land concession deals, infrastructure contracts, investment projects, licenses, and etc. that implicated the CM, his family and key political and business associates. SR also followed the money trail and exposed the alleged hidden wealth of CM Abdul Taib Mahmud and his family: their properties, corporate shareholdings and companies in Canada, United States, London, Australia, and various tax-havens around the world.<sup>13</sup> Also exposed was how the Sarawak CM and the Malaysian PM both used international image consultants and public relations agencies to burnish their image and that of their respective governments in the face of international criticism against business, investment and environmental practices (Sarawak Report, 1.8.11; The Independent, 28.10.11). Consequently, it surprised nobody when the website was attacked regularly by 'coordinated DDOS (Distributed Denial Of Service) attacks' by anonymous 'cyber-warriors' paid to bring down the website and prevent people from following breaking investigative

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<sup>12</sup> The sister-in-law of former British PM Gordon Brown, Clare Rewcastle-Brown was born and spent her early years of youth in Sarawak. When she returned in 2005 for a visit, she was scandalized by the depth of corruption and the amount of environmental devastation. She was also surprised by Sarawak's feudal culture and deep fear among the local populace in standing up for their rights and their livelihoods. SR was thus set up in early 2010 to campaign against the destruction of Sarawak's remaining forests and to expose extensive corruption within the state government led by CM Abdul Taib Mahmud (The Independent, 10.3.11).

<sup>13</sup> See the Sarawak Report website here for details: [www.sarawakreport.org](http://www.sarawakreport.org).

stories<sup>14</sup> (Sarawak Report, 6.4.13).

Recognising that the internet had a limited urban reach in Sarawak, Clare Rewcastle-Brown subsequently set up RFS as a media campaigning tool to complement SR in an effort to expose and disseminate information about the alleged scandalous and corrupt behavior of the CM, his family, relatives, and business and political associates among the local rural people of Sarawak, many of whom had access only to the official print, radio and TV media. Seizing upon this opportunity, the PR opposition purchased over 100,000 shortwave radios, mainly with financial support from local party sympathizers and benefactors from Kuala Lumpur. These radios were distributed free throughout hundreds of rural longhouses in key electoral focus seats in an opposition effort to break the BN's powerful monopoly of the media. RFS broadcast daily in both Iban and Malay languages for two hours only given its shoestring budget and limited human resources. It's attractiveness to the local populace was its independent news reporting and the fact that listeners were encouraged to call in during the programme to air their views on various topics or even to make a complaint. It was a guerrilla operation which deeply irritated the BN federal and state governments who have long held sway over Malaysian airwaves. Consequently, the federal and state governments took many opportunities to interfere and jam RFS broadcasts (Sarawak Report, 6.4.13) in contravention of all internationally-recognised conventions. So too, the RFS webpage which hosted podcasts of their daily programmes were regularly subjected to coordinated DDOS attacks to bring down the site (Sarawak Report, 6.4.13). Nonetheless, along with SR, RFS emerged as the opposition coalition's most potent media weapons in the vicious propaganda war that waged throughout the election campaign. Indeed, had it not been for RFS, the incoherent rural campaign of especially PKR in Sarawak would have been even more shambolic than it was.

### *The Disorganised BN 'Campaign' Preparations*

In their run-up to the elections, there were no problems or even any indication of dissent within the PBB helmed by CM Abdul Taib Mahmud given his tight rein upon, and generous handouts to, the party faithful throughout his tenure of office. This was not however the case

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<sup>14</sup> In recognition of their work, RFS won the '2013 IPI Free Media Pioneer Award'. The International Press Institute applauded the 'station's efforts to bring freedom of information and freedom of speech to the isolated communities in Malaysia's Borneo rainforest state' (International Press Institute, 2.5.13).

with PBB's coalition partners, the SUPP, SPDP and PRS.

After their electoral misfortunes of April 2011 which saw them lose 13 out of 19 state assembly seats (including the defeat of Deputy Chief Minister George Chan), the SUPP Central Executive Committee (CEC) resolved not to accept any State Cabinet position on account of their loss of urban Chinese support. This resolution was defied by then Deputy Secretary-General Wong Soon Koh who accepted a Ministerial position at state level. Wong's defiance of the SUPP CEC decision led to the emergence of a major power tussle between his own Sibu faction and the Miri faction led by then Deputy President and Federal Minister of Energy, Green Technology and Water, Peter Chin Kah Fui, an acolyte of defeated SUPP President George Chan (The Star Online, 20.4.11). This power tussle was ultimately decided by party elections in the SUPP Triennial Delegate Conference in December 2011. Peter Chin was then duly elected unopposed as Party President by the remaining SUPP conference delegates who comprised mainly those of his own faction.<sup>15</sup> However, bad blood remained.

Internal conflict also wracked SPDP which lost five of its elected representatives in 2011 owing to a factional power struggle between members loyal to its party president William Mawan and those loyal to its Deputy President Sylvester Entrie. Spilling over from a closely contested party election in late 2009, things came to a head when Sylvester Entrie was summarily sacked from the party for 'insubordination' in November 2011. Four other elected representatives loyal to Entrie were later stripped of their party positions and given 'show cause' letters, ostensibly for boycotting the party's Supreme Council meetings and all party functions over a period of two years (FMT, 10.12.11). Citing a 'loss of confidence' in William Mawan's leadership (Malaysian Digest, 24.10.11), the four elected representatives quit the party in December 2011.<sup>16</sup> All five however declared that they remained affiliated with 'Barisan Nasional as they were elected on a BN ticket'. They also reiterated their loyalty 'to both federal and the state BN's top leaderships' (FMT, 10.12.11). These 'Group of Five' (G5) elected representatives duly proceeded to dispute and undermine William Mawan's

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<sup>15</sup> SUPP elected assemblymen and parliamentarians also took sides. All SUPP's six state assemblymen - Wong (Bawang Assan), Datuk Francis Hardin (Simanggang), Datuk Lee Kim Shin (Senadin), Dr Jerip Susil (Bengoh), Ranum Mina (Opar) and Dr Johnical Rayong (Engkilili) backed Wong Soon Koh. So did Lanang MP Tiong Th ai King. Backing Peter Chin were the three remaining MPs, Yong Khoon Seng (Stampin), Ding Kuong Hiing (S arikei) and Deputy Foreign Minister Datuk Richard Riot (Serian) (NST, 10.12.11).

<sup>16</sup> Apart from Assemblyman Sylvester Entrie, the four other SPDP elected representatives sacked were MP Tiki Lafe (Mas Gading), Assemblyman Peter Nansian (Tasik Biru), Assemblywoman Rosy Yunus (Bekenu) and Assemblyman Paulus Gumbang (Bukit Danau).

leadership in SPDP, consistently citing the support they enjoyed from the BN leaderships. And this was not incorrect since Sylvester Entrie, Peter Nansian and Rosey Yunus, despite being sacked from SPDP remained Assistant Ministers in CM Abdul Taib Mahmud's state government to the irritation of William Mawan. As well, Paulus Gumbang was appointed Chairman of the Miri Port Authority in February 2012, a position normally reserved for an SPDP nominee (FMT, 28.1.12). There was also no clarity as to who would have ultimate say in the selection of the new BN candidate for the Mas Gading parliamentary seat which was held by SPDP's Tiki Lafe until he was sacked from the party (The Star Online, 19.3.13). As if this was not bad enough and further hobbling SPDP's preparations for GE13, SPDP's Meluan Assemblyman Wong Judat resigned from the party and the BN in August 2012 so as to contest GE13 on an opposition ticket (with the Sarawak Worker's Party) in pursuit of a personal political vendetta against BN Federal Minister Joseph Salang from PRS (FMT, 8.8.12).

Similarly hobbled by intra-party fractures in their run-up to GE13 was PRS helmed by party president and State Minister for Land Development, James Masing. Once close allies, Assistant Minister Larry Sng got embroiled in a factional dispute with James Masing and was expelled from the party in 2006. Also expelled from PRS was his powerful businessman-politician father, Sng Chee Hua. These expulsions erupted into a major split that even threatened the party's legal existence in 2009. After Larry's expulsion, requests were made by James Masing to the CM requesting that Larry Sng, now partyless, be removed from all state government posts. Instead, CM Abdul Taib Mahmud snubbed the request and added more portfolios to Larry's official responsibilities. It was also very obvious that in 'the interests of the state coalition' (FMT, 23.2.11), CM Taib wanted Larry Sng's expulsion rescinded, Larry reinstated into PRS and Larry re-nominated as the BN candidate to defend his Pelagus state seat in the 2011 state election. Reportedly, unlike James Masing, the CM regarded Larry Sng highly as he was a "very useful fellow, a very hardworking one and a very loyal to BN" (FMT, 23.2.11). PRS President James Masing's hostility towards Larry Sng and his father however ensured that Larry Sng remained partyless and was ultimately dropped from the BN list of candidates for the 2011 state election. These mutual snubs between CM Abdul Taib Mahmud and James Masing over Larry Sng only highlighted tensions within the Sarawak BN leadership. Intra-BN tension between PRS and PBB erupted after Larry Sng and his father set up the Sarawak Worker's Party in April 2012 as a 'BN-friendly' party (FMT, 29.5.12) and declared that they would stand against PRS in all six PRS parliamentary seats. It was clear



evidence of a political vendetta. What raised the eyebrows of many was the silence of the BN leadership to criticize or even condemn the SWP for their ‘traitorous’ moves. Hence, angry at talk that the Sarawak BN had tacitly endorsed SWP’s move, PRS lashed out and ‘warned both state and federal BN leaders that any endorsement of SWP’s decision to field candidates in BN-held seats will be akin to signing BN’s death warrant’ (FMT, 29.5.12).

Seen in perspective, both coalitions, PR and BN, had their share of problems and factional disunity that affected their preparations for GE13. The difference however, was that the BN had the power of incumbency and access to the 3Ms, namely money, media and machinery (of government). Since the Sarawak BN was not involved in any state election unlike that of the BN in all other state, this also meant that CM Abdul Taib Mahmud could officially deploy state government resources to assist BN in its parliamentary campaign. This certainly gave the BN a distinct advantage over the PR especially in getting their message across to the public even before parliament was dissolved and throughout the election campaign period. It is thus to the campaign issues of the respective coalitions that we now turn to.

### **Campaign Issues and Electoral Strategies of the BN and PR in GE13**

#### *The PR Campaign*

Drawing upon their earlier long term administration master plan, the *Buku Jingga* (Orange Book) agreed in 2010, the PR Central Leadership launched *Manifesto Rakyat: Pakatan Harapan Rakyat* (The People’s Manifesto. The People’s Pact. The People’s Hope.) as their electoral policy platform for GE13 (Pakatan Rakyat 2013). Highlighted in the manifesto were key promises to the people of Malaysia as listed in PR’s Alternative Budget 2013, namely generous handouts and tax breaks to match those of the BN government. As well, there were nearly 50 other socio-economic and other policy promises and commitments to reform institutions and improve the income, welfare and quality of life of the people. Further, while much within the PR manifesto was valuable and applicable the Sarawak PR was strangely, rather blasé about relying upon their own joint-coalition manifesto document although they did produce copies for circulation among the electorate.

Instead, they chose to prioritize other key issues which they felt were more pertinent to the state’s electorate. Specifically, the salient issues prioritised were that of NCR land grabs,

corruption and cronyism (esp. related to CM Abdul Taib Mahmud), disparity in development with West Malaysia and a return to the spirit of the Malaysia Agreement. Hence, the contents of the ‘Kuching Declaration’ (also known as the ‘Borneo Agenda’) were highlighted throughout the campaign: i.e. recognition of ‘Sarawak and Sabah as equal autonomous partners within Malaysia with fair power-sharing arrangements’; a commitment to ‘solve the perennial national problem of illegal immigration and citizenship’; the setting up of Land Commissions to restore Native Customary Rights over Native Customary Lands’; to ‘endorse the appointment of Sarawak and Sabah citizens to head Government Departments in their own respective States; an increase in ‘petroleum and hydrocarbon royalties to 20% from the present 5%’; and to upgrade ‘the level of infrastructure development to be on par with Peninsular Malaysia’ (Pakatan Rakyat 2012). Unfortunately, when the votes were counted, it was clear that PKR’s emphasis on these ‘Borneo Agenda’ issues did not capture the imagination or the votes of the local electorate. By taking a rather narrow ‘nationalistic’ approach to the campaign instead of relying upon the broader socio-economic focus of their own coalition’s *Buku Jingga*, PKR badly mis-read the importance ‘Borneo Agenda’ issues to the voters.

PR Sarawak also highlighted the key failures of the BN government after 50 years in government. The high debt burden, illicit capital outflows, flip-flop policies in education, a serious brain-drain, racist government policies, the serious crime rate, distribution of illegal identity cards to foreigners by the BN in Sabah (Project IC) and the continued lack of development were all emphasized (DAP Malaysia 2013). On the basis of these, the Sarawak PR adopted the collective slogan, ‘*Ini Kali lah! Kerajaan Baru, Harapan Baru!*’ (This time! New Government, New Hope!) as their campaign clarion call. As well, a second slogan, ‘*Ubah Sekarang. Bersihkan Malaysia!*’ (Change Now. Clean Malaysia!) was used extensively by the DAP in their urban campaign. Both slogans were very popular but these campaigns somehow did not translate into any significant electoral result beyond what was achieved in urban areas).

Throughout the election campaign, the mood within the Sarawak PR was upbeat, more so after a video was released by another investigative organization, Global Witness that documented ‘shady land deals in Sarawak that appeared to implicate the long-serving state’s chief minister and his family’ (The Malaysian Insider, 21.3.13). Clips of the ‘undercover footage of the corruption and illegality at the heart of governance in Sarawak’ (Global

Witness 2013) was also aired by Al-Jazeera News. Specifically, the video captured interviews with members of CM Abdul Taib Mahmud's cousins and their lawyers who explained candidly how they evaded 'Malaysia's laws and taxes' and 'how they cream off huge profits at the expense of indigenous people, and hide their dirty money in Singapore' (Global Witness 2013). CM Abdul Taib Mahmud denied the allegations and threatened to sue, since the video supported 'the opposition' and 'tarnished his reputation' (Borneo Post, 24.3.13). Still, the video caused a national storm of consternation and anger since it supported the numerous allegations of corruption and impropriety at the heart of CM Abdul Taib Mahmud's administration (FMT, 21.3.13). Sensing vulnerability within the BN ranks, PKR Sarawak translated and dubbed the video into Malay and Iban and distributed thousands of CDs to rural areas to assist their campaign (The Malaysian Insider, 21.3.13). Similarly, RFS aired snippets from the video on their daily programme throughout the month of April as part of their efforts to support PKR's rural campaign (Radio Free Sarawak, 1.4.13).

Another major issue that simmered throughout much of PR Sarawak's campaign before finally boiling over was that of religious freedom (and vice versa, religious discrimination) arising from the Allah/Malay Bible issue. Although not spoken about openly during PR ceramahs owing to religious sensitivities, it was nonetheless a key issue often whispered about in many smaller gatherings, both Christian and Muslim, often drawing strong reactions. PKR Sarawak Chief Baru Bian referred to the controversy in late December 2012 and urged the 'ruling coalition and the opposition to agree to a common moratorium not to use the Allah or Alkitab issue as political posturing for the forthcoming 13th General Elections' (Baru Bian, 28.12.13). Although the government had in 2011 allowed the use of Malay and Iban language bibles in Sabah and Sarawak in a 10-point agreement (Malaysian Insider, 3.4.11), various fascist groups like PERKASA openly stoked religious jingoism and Muslim-Christian tensions in the run-up to the elections. PERKASA even suggested that Muslims should 'seize and burn copies of Bibles which contain the term "Allah" or other Arabic religious words' (FMT, 19.1.13). The government remained silent. PERKASA's actions and the lack of any government response only raised suspicions that both were in collusion for political and electoral ends. The government's silence in the face of PERKASA's venom also caused distress among indigenous Bumiputera Christian leaders in Sarawak. CM Abdul Taib Mahmud also weighed into the controversy in mid-April but only to insinuate that, 'Some people are making allegations that the Christians are being discriminated in the state in the attempts to break us apart' (Chief Minister of Sarawak, 14.4.13). After urging his audience to

‘protect unity and solidarity’, he urged them to ‘reject the politics of condemnation and destruction being brought by PKR, DAP and PAS in the campaigns for the elections’ (ibid.). Seen together, his comments seemed to suggest that the PR coalition (and not PERKASA) was responsible for religious discrimination and tension in the state.

The issue eventually caused the electorate to split along religious lines. Barely a week before polling day, the situation boiled over when Sarawak prison authorities seized ‘hundreds of Malay and Iban-language Bibles with the word “Allah” from the Sibuluan prison’ (FMT, 29.4.13). The action drew strong reactions from the DAP who condemned ‘the Barisan Nasional government for this act of aggression’ (FMT, 30.4.13) and demanded the return of the bibles to inmates. Even the Anglican Archbishop of Southeast Asia and Bishop of Kuching, The Most Rev. Bolly Lapok, in his capacity as the Chairperson of the Association of Churches in Sarawak, issued a pastoral communiqué on the eve of the election criticizing the authorities on the way they allowed extremist groups and bigoted voices to inflame religious sensitivities. As well, the statement outlined in detail the many steps the BN had taken over the years in various states that infringed upon the constitutional rights of Bumiputera Christians to ‘speak their own language and to practice their religion’ (Association of Churches in Sarawak, 2.5.13). The statement demanded a ‘tangible commitment from the authorities to respect and uphold the freedom of religion guaranteed by the Federal Constitution’ (ibid.). Although well-intentioned, it only polarized society further along religious lines.

But the seizure was more than a coincidence. The action plus the reactions effectively influenced many Muslim supporters of PR to hesitate in voting for the opposition since the Bible seizure action served to suggest that Malay- and Iban-language Bibles were being shared with Muslim inmates. True or otherwise, the perception raised the spectre of Christian proselytisation of vulnerable Muslims. And it was sufficient to marginalize many Muslims who were already divided over the issue (Malaysiakini, 10.1.13) As well there was genuine fear among Muslims that voting for the PR opposition – who did so well in the 2011 state elections – would lead to further erosion of the status of Islam nationally, especially if the BN lost GE13. Needless to say, the issue also forced many PAS and PKR Muslim candidates and their election campaigns on the back foot.

Consequently, with many more Muslims living in rural areas, and despite PKR’s best

campaign efforts in exploiting NCR land issues and the Global Witness video, they did not manage to win any rural seat and only managed to cut into the BN's rural vote count. It was a reflection of the strength of the BN's hold over the rural electorate in their campaign, an issue which we now address.

### *The BN Campaign*

It would be a mistake to attribute an election campaign to the Sarawak BN coalition since the BN coalition did not really organize any election campaign. They only provided the candidates. But their GE13 parliamentary campaign, like the 2011 State Election before it, was largely outsourced to agencies of the Federal and State governments who organized and ran the BN's election campaign. Things were even fuzzier in Sarawak since the BN State Government was not dissolved and legally remained in office. Under the guise of official state government programmes, the Sarawak BN unashamedly utilized public resources to the hilt to advance their parliamentary campaign. In other words, there was little differentiation between BN, the political coalition, and the BN-led civil services during the campaign. Fifty years of incumbency had glossed over this fact so effectively that no media, not even the alternative internet media, commented on this massively unequal contest.

But it was not only a question of harmonizing the BN's national campaign machinery. Just like the 2011 State Election, the BN's GE13 campaign was also completely nationalized by the 1Malaysia theme of PM Najib Abdul Razak's government that centred on largesse and electoral handouts. As well, the BN campaign trail was largely organized around free meals, entertainment and gift-giving. This served not only to divert attention away from the substantive issues of the campaign but also served to distract attention from the corruption-plagued and disliked Chief Minister towards the more popular PM Najib.<sup>17</sup>

The Sarawak BN's very public election campaign was effectively launched by the Governor on 1 April 2013 when he presided over the state's '50th independence anniversary celebrations' that had as its theme, '*Sarawak Harmoni, Kemakmuran Dinikmati*' (A Harmonious Sarawak Enjoys Prosperity). This celebration was simultaneously launched in 47 other locations throughout the state and collectively drew about 50,000 participants on

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<sup>17</sup> Ever since he became PM, polls have shown that Najib Abdul Razak has consistently been more popular than UMNO or the BN government coalition that he heads (The Edge Daily, 27.2.13).

opening night (Borneo Post, 1.4.13). But, it did not stop there since the celebrations were deliberately organized and funded by the state government to be a rolling and on-going celebration throughout the election campaign until September 16, ostensibly to showcase the ‘state’s achievements’ and to ‘unite the people’ (ibid.).

Although these 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration functions were the main BN campaign platforms, there were other ‘usual’ events that were also used as campaign platforms, many on government expense. Opening ceremonies, ‘Leaders meet-the-people’ sessions, development infrastructure project launchings, culture symposiums, cultural festivals, community association leader’s installation dinners, earth-breaking and opening ceremonies for new mosques, bridge earth-breaking ceremonies, road opening and site realignment ceremonies, rural electricity supply projects, police anti-crime campaign and motorcycle unit launch, and etc. all became useful platforms to highlight the federal BN’s 17-point development and welfare-oriented manifesto that promised extensive cash and free handouts, millions more jobs and lower taxes (FMT, 7.4.13). Also highlighted was Sarawak BN’s 5-point supplementary manifesto that pledged, ‘good governance; transformation of the state economy; transformation of the rural areas to ensure that people there are not left behind and marginalised; preserving peace, harmony and stability in the state and a sustainable environment’ (NST, 17.4.13). In all these functions, the electorate was also regularly warned against voting for the opposition who were merely full of sweet promises, had no development track record, were disunited, and were likely to bring chaos to the country if they were elected (Chief Minister of Sarawak, 24.3.13; 14.4.13).<sup>18</sup>

In many of these events, free food, mineral water, T-shirts, caps, bags and other gifts were distributed. Also distributed to all in attendance were thick (58-pages!) glossy dark blue booklets (the colour of the BN coalition) showcasing over 200 products and services that the BN federal government had distributed as largesse as part of its economic transformation programme and people-oriented annual budgets starting in 2012 (Barisan Nasional 2013). All these giveaways were useful reminders to the electorate of the BN government’s benevolence and generosity, especially its *Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia* (BR1M) (1Malaysia People’s Assistance) cash aid of RM500 to all households earning less than RM3000/month. In

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<sup>18</sup> Further details of many of these programmes can be found in the website of the Chief Minister of Sarawak; see the section ‘In the News’ under the ‘Media Centre’ drop down menu. (<http://chiefministertaib.sarawak.gov.my/en/media-centre/news>).

addition to these budgetary giveaways, monitoring of news reports of just one English newspaper in Sarawak showed BN giveaways during the election campaign period amounted to approximately RM256,195,699 or about RM8.26 million per constituency in money, material gifts, development projects and development promises. And this is likely a serious underestimate of what really was distributed since these only represent what the particular newspaper managed to report! What was not reported was thus not recorded!<sup>19</sup> (See Table 3.) These handouts were a clear indicator of the BN's 'goodwill' in buying the election by bribing voters. The electorate was also reminded that the hugely popular BR1M handouts would continue and even increase to RM1200 if the BN was returned to power (FMT, 7.4.13). *Ipso facto*, the point imprinted into the electorate's mind was that failure to re-elect a BN government would mean the end of the free annual cash handouts.

**Table 3: Identifying Electoral Patronage, Electoral Corruption and Money Politics During GE13 in Sarawak**

<b>Types of Electoral Patronage/Electoral Corruption</b>	<b>TOTAL (RM)</b>
<b>MONEY</b> Cash, Cheques, Shopping Vouchers, etc.	RM156,861,699
<b>MATERIAL GIFTS</b> Umbrellas, Caps, Bags, T-shirts, Liquor; Food, Parties; boats; fishing nets, outboard motors, petrol/diesel, Construction material for minor rural projects (MRP) (like wood, zinc, cement, water pipes, electric wiring, steel rods); generator sets, TV, Fridge, Astro decoders, cooking utensils; etc.	RM1,900,000
<b>DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS</b> Launching or Opening Ceremony of proposed/semi-completed/completed development projects or minor rural development projects.	RM87,634,000
<b>DEVELOPMENT PROMISES</b> Promises to provide people (association, school, organisation, village, religious groups/houses, etc) with certain benefits and facilities like roads, telephone service, bridges, schools, clinics, electricity; water supply, boats; fishing nets, etc if the people vote for the politician or his/her party; announcement of budget allocation for a project; etc.	RM9,800,000
<b>OTHER</b> Land Title; House Temporary Occupation Licence (TOL), business licenses, job appointments; etc.	NONE
<b>OVERALL TOTAL</b>	<b>RM256,195,699</b>

*Source:* Borneo Post, various issues.

In fact, so important were these official handouts in the campaign that had they not been distributed, the BN would have likely lost more seats. And yet, even with these handouts, there were very close calls. For example, the Baram seat, which the BN only won marginally, saw the involvement of an activist civil society group, SAVE Rivers that joined forces with PKR to campaign against the BN on a single issue, namely their mutual opposition to the BN

<sup>19</sup> Also not recorded was data from the rest of the English, Malay and Chinese print media.

plans to build the Baram Dam.

Deeply un-nerved by SAVE Rivers' ability to network and organize resistance to the Baram Dam, the BN leadership was forced to remove the long-standing but deeply unpopular MP Jacob Dungau Sagan from re-contesting the Baram election. In his place, they nominated former Limbang District Officer Anyi Ngau as their candidate (Borneo Post, 16.4.13). The choice was strategic and tied the candidate to the BN's politics of development and patronage campaign approach since District Officers are key actors at the local level of the BN government development delivery system. As a local from Long Silat in the upper Baram area, the choice of Anyi Ngau guaranteed a familiar face to champion the interests of local residents and the Baram electorate. As well, since Long Silat would be submerged if the dam was built, Anyi's choice seemed to assure the local electorate that there was nothing to fear since the BN would not nominate someone to push through a dam that would submerge his own village! But it also took a huge amount of largesse and handouts. Reportedly, all the 'logging firms 'favoured' with timber licenses and provisional leases to clear and 'replant' thousands of hectares of forest lands in Baram' were asked to 'donate' to the Barisan Nasional's campaign to retain the parliamentary constituency' (FMT, 25.4.13b). Then, villagers were reminded that if they did not 'vote for the BN candidate' (FMT, 25.4.13b), all their 1Malaysia freebies like the BRIM, *e-kasih*, financial aid to handicapped persons and other welfare assistance would be withdrawn. Apart from other gifts, allegedly cash handouts of RM100 to each voter in Kampung Long Jeeh, Baram were also distributed by BN agents 'to buy votes in the constituency' (ibid.). Such practices, if true, would likely also have occurred in other parts of the constituency. The BN eventually won the Baram election by an extremely slim margin of 194 votes. But it needed the assistance of a maverick independent candidate who polled 363 votes, to help them win!

### **The Role of Civil Society in Sarawak's GE13**

One of the key developments which emerged out of the GE13 experience in Sarawak was that of the role played by civil society organizations in the election campaigns of the opposition PR coalition. Prior to the dissolution of parliament, a few non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like SAVE Rivers, the Sarawak Dayak Iban Association (SADIA), and Barefoot Mercy slanted their activities towards supporting the political opposition on issues like NCR lands, water and electricity supply, and opposition to dam-building.



SADIA has long been active on land rights issues on behalf of its members as well as the Dayak community at large. It has consistently mapped the NCR lands of native communities involved in legal disputes over NCR lands. Deeply frustrated from years of slow progress over the resolution of disputes involving the proprietary rights of natives over their NCR lands, SADIA got involved in supporting the electoral campaign of Nicholas Mujah, a SADIA staff member who stood in the large rural constituency of Sri Aman as the PKR candidate. Nicholas Mujah had, over many years, defended the NCR land rights of numerous native communities in Sri Aman. SADIA's support in campaigning in the difficult rural terrain was not insubstantial. With SADIA's help, he polled 25.4 percent of the vote, an impressive figure since Nicholas was only selected by PKR to contest in Sri Aman a few days before Nomination Day.

BareFoot Mercy, a citizen's initiative, was started by socially-conscious individuals in Kuching concerned about persistent poverty and the lack of development infrastructure in numerous rural villages despite five decades of 'development'. Barefoot Mercy organized trips to survey community needs and the prevalence of rural poverty in an effort to match 'real life needs with appropriate solutions' (BareFoot Mercy 2013). Fundraising events were organized locally in Kuching as well as abroad in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore to tap support from the Sarawak diaspora working in these cities. Old clothes and other materials were collected and distributed to poor communities. Large water tanks were delivered to rural households without any water supply in Kanowit district. As well, mini-hydro rural electrification systems were installed in a select number of villages like Long Tanid, Long Kerebangan, Pa Brunut (all in Lawas) and Nanga Talong Engkari (Lubok Antu). All these projects utilized the collaborative self-help approach (*gotong-royong*) to minimize costs. These mini-infrastructure projects were all launched by the local PKR candidate so as to showcase the fact that the opposition coalition could deliver critical services like electricity supply even if the BN did not (BareFoot Mercy 2013). These rural electrification and water supply projects were effectively small efforts by urban-based supporters of PKR to support the electoral chances of rural PKR candidates. Of greater significance was BareFoot Mercy's initiative in assisting rural communities gain access to alternative sources of urban or global information, hitherto controlled by government radio and television network stations. Their rural connectivity initiative saw them purchase shortwave radios for distribution in the interior areas (BareFoot Mercy 2011). Recipients of these radios were encouraged to tune in

to listen to Radio Free Sarawak, the London-based guerilla radio station set up specifically to challenge the monopolistic control of the airwaves by the government and to bring down CM Abdul Taib Mahmud.

Growing concerns about the un-necessary development and socio-environmental impact of mega-dams led to the establishment of SAVE Rivers in October 2011 as ‘a grassroots network of indigenous communities and civil society organizations working to protect indigenous human rights and to stop destructive dams in Sarawak’ (SAVE Sarawak Rivers 2011). Since its founding, Save Rivers<sup>20</sup> has campaigned actively to raise awareness among the local Baram population about the consequences of the proposed Baram hydroelectric power dam which would submerge 25 villages and displace over 20,000 rural villagers. To this end, SAVE Rivers has worked closely with the PKR Baram candidate and held numerous local and state-wide meetings designed to register local opposition towards the dam. SAVE Rivers also took their campaign overseas to Australia in late-2012 via a speaking-tour. There, they exposed the complicity of Australian companies (specifically Hydro-Tasmania) in aiding the destruction of rainforests and contributing towards human rights violations via the provision of expert consultancy services to Sarawak Energy Berhad (SAVE Sarawak Rivers 2012). Collectively, the campaigns of SAVE Sarawak Rivers against the building of the Baram Dam and the BN had high impact since through their efforts and networks they succeeded in highlighting the issue of destructive dam building in Sarawak to the world.

Although none of the above civil society organizations succeeded in successfully aiding in the election of any PKR candidate, their emergence and open efforts to work beside the opposition PR were significant considering that civil society has long been very weak in Sarawak. Hence, their activities were important markers in the overall advancement of increasing peoples’ participation in elections.

### **Conclusion: Implications of the GE13 Outcome in Sarawak**

What then does the future hold for Sarawak and Malaysia, post-GE13?

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<sup>20</sup> The key objectives of SAVE Rivers are to: stop the construction of all mega-dams in Sarawak; strengthen networks and communication between affected communities, individuals, and civil society organizations that are concerned about the dams; share and disseminate information exposing the destructive nature and adverse effects of mega-dams; and support activities or events opposing the construction of mega-dams in the state (Save Rivers 2011).

CM Abdul Taib Mahmud's win of 25 seats in Sarawak was really a triumph of the BN's ability to use and abuse public resources, the civil service machinery and the mass media for their own electoral ends. Certainly, the opposition PR Sarawak could not match this, nor should they have. However, the opposition DAP Sarawak, showed that with proper organizing of party resources and volunteers; and appropriate media strategies, they pose a serious challenge to the hitherto BN's dominance of political power in Sarawak. That PKR Sarawak largely failed in their rural campaign despite having made significant vote percentage gains is an indicator of inadequate leadership and a serious weakness in party vision and organization amongst its membership. Hence, for democracy to deepen in Sarawak there is a dire need on the part of PR to look seriously into sourcing younger, more visionary leaders. There is also a need for strengthening the organizational structures and democratic practices within their respective parties. In other words, this election showed up various key institutional weaknesses within PR Sarawak, which it needs to address if it wants to make any further electoral headway against the might of the BN's money, machinery and media.

The second implication of GE13 is the emergence of CM Abdul Taib Mahmud as the kingmaker of Malaysian politics. Despite all the allegations of corruption and nepotism leveled against him he remains in office and very much in charge. Even the highly damaging Global Witness 'Shadow State' exposé video, did not budge him. In fact, given the good performance of the Sarawak BN component parties, Taib's influence in national politics has been enhanced. He currently holds the fate of the whole BN federal government in the palm of his hand. He directly controls 14 PBB MPs and a further 11 from the other component parties of the Sarawak BN coalition, giving him influence over 25 (or 33.25%) out of 133 BN MPs. Any shift of loyalties, any parliamentary crossover by CM Abdul Taib Mahmud's bloc of 14 seats would see the BN federal in deep water. Any shift of 25 seats would see the federal BN collapse.

CM Taib's strongman role in Sarawak and his clout as kingmaker in national politics does carry short- and long-term consequences. In the short-term, it is likely that, in exchange for his 'absolute loyalty' to the federal BN coalition (The Star Online, 23.6.13), he will extract further concessions and financial incentives for his state administration to strengthen his political position via the distribution of further development largesse to the political and business edifice that he controls and heads. While beneficial to those presently closely-linked

to him and the Sarawak BN, it does however raise long-term concerns about the robustness of political and economic institutions, and the commitment of the federal government towards ensuring policy predictability, bureaucratic rationality, and legal accountability and transparency given non-action over the serious allegations of corruption and nepotism leveled against CM Abdul Taib Mahmud. Put differently, what happens when CM Abdul Taib Mahmud, who is already 74 years old, leaves active politics? Will he use his added political clout to establish robust state institutions having predictable rules and rational procedures that hold fast during the forthcoming political transition or will he continue to further entrench deep-rooted patronage based on personal loyalties? What would be the consequences to the long-term political stability of the federal BN coalition? What would be the consequences to the political and business elite presently benefiting from their close links to CM Abdul Taib Mahmud? What would be the consequences to serious long-term international investors and to economic stability and sustainability in the state?

The third implication arising from GE13 has been the increasing and continued nationalisation of Sarawak politics by federal politicians during elections; a process that began with the 2011 state elections. Ever since merger in 1963, all Sarawak BN state governments have, to varying degrees, stubbornly asserted their ‘independence’ and eschewed political control from the federal BN by maintaining decision-making power over when to hold state elections. In addition, all Sarawak BN state governments have maintained strict immigration controls over arrivals of Malaysian citizens from West Malaysia.<sup>21</sup> Concomitantly, they have maintained strict controls over residence, property and business licensing controls over West Malaysians, preferring to discriminate all West Malaysians as ‘foreigners’ intent on accessing the wealth of the state. These controls really amount to the preservation of an economic monopoly of all business opportunities in the state for the local BN-linked political and business elite based on a model that favours patronage and eschews open competition.

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<sup>21</sup> Under the 1963 Malaysia Agreement, West Malaysians are subject to immigration controls by the Sarawak state government that presently allow them visa-free entry of three months. While extensions may be granted, they are frowned upon and West Malaysians often have to exit the state before returning for a further three-month period. With the exception of federal government civil servants (whose service agency are as identified in the 1963 Malaysia Agreement), all West Malaysians working in Sarawak are legally required to apply for a work permit, granted at the absolute discretion of the state government. Those who retire or lose their jobs or who have their work permits cancelled are required to leave the state. Federal government civil servants based in Sarawak are also required by law to leave the state when they end their service with the federal government.

This 'us' versus 'them' outlook has thus allowed the Sarawak BN to regionalize election issues. Through control of the official media, it has allowed the Sarawak BN to portray the Sarawak PR opposition as being West Malaysian 'outsiders' who will, if elected, undermine the state's hitherto political stability, derail ethnic harmony and ruin the economy (Borneo Post, 19.1.10; 5.10.10; 29.11.12). Since 2011 however, this strategy has slowly but surely been eroded by the overwhelming presence of federal BN politicians who have campaigned at length in the state. Internationally damaged by the huge tide of embarrassing corruption allegations against CM Abdul Taib Mahmud over the last decade and concerned about limiting potential electoral fallout, BN federal politicians and government agencies largely took over the conduct of election campaigns in Sarawak. In the process, they usurped the power of the Sarawak BN to set local election themes and campaign strategies. Instead, they re-focused election issues away from Sarawak (and from the CM) to that of national, more populist issues as was evident in GE13's 1Malaysia theme.<sup>22</sup> If anything, this was but the proverbial 'foot in the door' that further eroded Sarawak's relative autonomy from the federal government. Arguably, because of this, there could be possibly be some changes to the long-term sustainability of immigration controls, strict residence requirements, and property and business licensing rules for West Malaysians. If this happens, there is also a strong likelihood of a positive impact upon economic competitiveness in the state.

However, this is not completely assured because even as federal politicians have attempted to nationalize Sarawak elections and politics, they have also reaped an unexpected policy blowback. By only winning 86 parliamentary seats in West Malaysia and 47 in East Malaysia (Sabah: 22, Sarawak: 25), the federal BN dominated by UMNO now has to accommodate the demands of the Sarawak (and Sabah) BN simply to ensure their own survival. UMNO and PM Najib Abdul Razak recognised this dependence by doling out 20 full and deputy ministerial positions to politicians from Sarawak and Sabah (The Malaysian Insider, 29.5.13). This has since ensured that Sarawakian issues and perspectives will likely now be more fully included into national discussions and policies. In other words, a fourth implication of this GE13 has been a deeper integration of Sarawakian issues into the national life of the country, which is not a bad thing considering that the federal government has often had a blind spot towards Sabah and Sarawak when it comes to the design of many national policies; a fact

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<sup>22</sup> A sordid twist to this process of nationalizing politics in Sarawak during GE13 was when the DAP enacted large posters in Kuching (Borneo Post, 30.4.13) that highlighted the murder of Altantuya Shaaribuu, the Mongolian model who was murdered in October 2006 by special forces policemen attached to the PM Najib's security detail, but for no apparent motive!

noted by CM Abdul Taib Mahmud after the elections when he observed that, ‘the inclusion of more MPs from Sabah and Sarawak in the federal cabinet was most timely for better integration between the people of both states with their counterparts in Peninsular Malaysia’ (Borneo Post, 17.5.13). But there is also the danger that this ‘integration’ and CM Abdul Taib Mahmud’s present clout in Malaysian politics post-GE13 may lead to the proverbial situation of the tail wagging the dog; where one regional BN strongman sets the agenda for the country.

The fifth implication of GE13 is the expanding role of civil society, and especially of the role played by some relatively new independent non-government organizations like that of SAVE Rivers, SADIA and Barefoot Mercy. Although Sarawak has always had numerous civil society organisations, the quality of these older NGOs’ engagement with anything deemed ‘political’ or even socially ‘controversial’ in nature has long been deeply constrained by a pervasive feudal mentality, a lack of financial independence and fear of authoritarian laws. Older organizations have compromised their independence in exchange for annual state government grants and project funds. And nearly all older organizations have long had leaders who are closely-linked to the elite political and business families. Only of late, with a growing and highly-educated middle-class, has there been the emergence of a new class of professionals with a rising sense of social consciousness and readiness to engage society and to advance social interests that are inimical to that of the old political and business elite. Their emergence has also been helped by the repeal of various repressive laws like that of the Internal Security Act (Borneo Post, 17.4.12). Eschewing state government funds, they have maintained their freedom and independence by fund-raising locally and/or internationally. And when such NGOs are willing to openly work closely with opposition political parties, such efforts can only augur well for the future of civil society and of growing democratic space.

Finally, there is the need for urgent electoral reforms. Despite their best efforts, the conduct of GE13 in Sarawak was flawed and showed that the Elections Commission (EC) was incompetent and deeply unprofessional. They botched the use of indelible ink which turned out to be food colouring and which was thus easily wiped or washed away (The Malaysian Insider, 26.6.13). As well, the EC did not act on numerous allegations of money politics and vote-buying (PEMANTAU 2013). Nor did the undue use of government influence via development projects and the official media to procure votes even cause the EC to bat an

eyelid. Serious cases of constituency mal-apportionment exist that are in dire need of reform and re-balancing. Without these reforms, there can certainly be no promise of more professional government administrations arising out of future elections (ibid.).

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## **Interview**

PKR Sarawak State Liaison Committee Member, 4 May 2013 & 25 July 2013