

'Blue Waves versus Political Tsunami': Sarawak and the 2008 Malaysian General Election

'Gelombang Biru lawan Tsunami Politik': Sarawak dan Pilihan Raya Umum Malaysia 2008

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ABSTRAK

Pilihanraya Umum 2008 telah membawa 'bencana' kepada Barisan Nasional (BN). Parti itu bukan sahaja gagal mempertahankan dua pertiga kerusi di parlimen, tetapi tewas di lima buah negeri. Kekalahan ini dikaitkan dengan politik pembangkang yang bertambah kuat serta mengakibatkan 'gelombang tsunami politik' melanda beberapa buah negeri yang dahulunya merupakan kubu kuat BN. Lebih daripada itu kekalahan di beberapa buah negeri telah juga mengakhiri hegemoni BN dan seterusnya menimbulkan tanda tanya sama ada parti itu masih lagi relevan pada hari ini. Menariknya, Sarawak sekali lagi menjadi kubu kuat BN. Kemenangan BN di Sarawak pula ibarat 'gelombang biru' yang telah merencanakan harapan calon-calon pembangkang di Sarawak kecuali Bandar Kuching. Istilah 'gelombang biru' digunakan sempena warna biru sebagai warna bendera BN. Walaupun menang dengan jumlah kerusi yang banyak, tetapi hakikatnya ialah bahawa sokongan terhadap calon-calon BN di kawasan bandar merosot. Makalah ini membincang pertembungan di antara 'gelombang biru' dan 'tsunami politik' pada pilihanraya 2008 di Sarawak. Pertarungan ini dilihat dalam konteks 'politics of developmentalism' yang memberikan kesan kepada keputusan pilihanraya khasnya di luar bandar di Sarawak. Salah satu daripada cara 'politics of developmentalism' yang dilaksanakan ialah melalui pemberian projek-projek kerajaan sebagai alat penaungan dengan tujuan mengekalkan dan mendapatkan sokongan. Jelas bahawa strategi ini berkesan di kawasan luar bandar kerana pengundi luar bandar masih lagi kuat didorong oleh keinginan untuk memenuhi keperluan asas mereka.

Kata kunci: Pilihanraya, politik pembangunan, penaungan, Tanah Hak Adat, pakatan pembangkang

ABSTRACT

The 2008 general election was a disastrous outing for the National Front (Barisan Nasional). The party not only failed to retain two third of the seats in the national parliament but lost five states to the opposition. The defeat was attributed to strong opposition politics which had created 'political tsunami' of sorts and swept across several states which were formerly BN's stronghold. The defeat in several states also marked the end of BN's hegemony. It begs the question of whether BN is still relevant. Ironically Sarawak remained a bastion of BN and the party won all the parliamentary seats except one. BN's win in Sarawak was likened to a 'blue waves' (blue is the colour for BN's flags) that like 'political tsunami' in Peninsular Malaysia had swept away all the opposition candidates except for Bandar Kuching. However, despite the big win in term of seats the support for BN in the urban areas declined greatly with some of its candidates won with a slim majority. This article examines the contestation between 'blue waves' and 'political tsunami' in Sarawak during the 2008 elections. The contestation is examined in the contexts of 'politics of developmentalism', which really impacted the electoral outcome in the rural areas. 'Politics of developmentalism' is put into practice by using government projects as patronage tools for sustaining and securing political support. This strategy works well especially in the rural areas where politics is still very much driven by the urge to fulfill basic needs.

Keywords: Election, politics of development, patronage, Native Customary Rights, opposition pact

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian twelfth general election on 8 March 2008 was held about twenty months after the Sarawak state election in May 2006. Sarawak (and Sabah until 2004) is the only state where federal and state elections are held separately. In Sarawak this practice started in 1978 when Rahman Yaakub decided to delay the state election due to problems of seats allocation among Sarawak BN members (Chin 1996: 155). The state election was held in 1979. Since then the Sarawak state election was held separately. The gap between the state and the federal election is usually about two years. In the 2006 state election Sarawak Barisan Nasional (SBN) won 62 seats and opposition parties won 9 seats. Though it was another big win for SBN but its pride dented when one of its component parties, Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP), lost six of its urban seats to the opposition parties. It was indeed a wake-up call for SUPP and many were fast to conclude that SBN could no longer rely on SUPP to deliver Chinese votes in the urban areas.

The outcome of the 2006 state election shows that SBN was very 'vulnerable' especially in the urban areas. Meanwhile the opposition parties were upbeat and expected to repeat the 2006 success by winning more seats. The opposition parties in Sarawak grouped together under Pakatan Rakyat (PR) to create a stronger force to mount assault on SBN and they anticipated stronger and more forceful wind of change to blow across Sarawak during the 2008 general election.

This article examines the contestation between 'blue waves' and 'political tsunami' in the 2008 election in Sarawak. The term 'blue waves' refers to the winning power of the ruling party, Barisan Nasional. The colour for BN's flag is blue and when ever a BN candidate wins the election it is said that 'blue waves' have swept across that constituency. The term 'political tsunami' was coined in the 2008 election and it refers to winning power of the opposition parties and its 'devastating effects' on several BN's strongholds. In the 2008 election 'political tsunami' was said to have swept across several states in Peninsular Malaysia such as Penang, Perak, Selangor and Kedah which were known to BN's strongholds. It is argued that the 'political tsunami' occurred because voters had moved out from ethnic-based politics to what is called 'new politics', which demands more democratic participation and social justice, accountability and transparency. New politics is more multi-ethnic in orientation (Loh Kok Wah 2009).

'BLUE WAVES' VERSUS 'POLITICAL TSUNAMI'

This article discusses the contestation between 'blue waves' versus 'political tsunami' in the state of Sarawak during the 2008 election and explain why 'political tsunami' which impacted the electoral outcome in some states in Peninsular Malaysia did not have much impact on voters in Sarawak particularly in the rural areas. As far as Sarawak is concerned the 2008 election is not about changing the government but opportunities for changing leaders. It was just another ritual that provided legitimacy for Sarawak BN. Apparently Jomo's (1996: 90) argument that Malaysian elections have increasingly served to maintain and legitimize those already in power is still true for Sarawak.

Another feature of Sarawak politics which is central to the understanding of this contestation is patronage politics. According to Roff (1974), patronage politics has been a feature of Sarawak politics since the 1960s. Leigh (1974) concurs that it became an important feature of Sarawak politics because patronage effectively controls the behaviour of the recipients. Other works on Sarawak politics such as by Milne and Ratnam (1974), Searle (1983), Sanib Said (1985), Sabihah Osman (1987) Jayum (1987 & 1994), also highlight some features of patronage politics in electoral politics in Sarawak.

The term 'patronage' refers to the granting of favours to supporters and allies in return for political support. According to Theobald (1999: 504) favours

include appointment to office and the giving of contracts, tenders, timber concession, state land, and development projects in return for their support. Other favours which are often exchanged for political support are contacts, useful information, and protection from the law.

This article will also examine how patronage politics remain a salient feature of Sarawak politics especially in the rural areas. Politics in the rural areas is still very much driven by fulfilling of basic needs where voters tend to support candidates who can provide or promise them some tangible benefits in return for their support. Tangible benefits are in the forms of minor rural projects such as bridges, community halls, housing materials, plank walks and generator sets. It is more effective for the candidates to woo the voters by announcing projects, grants or personal donations during public rallies. Voters want something tangible and not merely promises or ‘empty talk’ (*cakap kosong*) (Interview with a senior politician in Kuching on 24 April 2002). As one politician said, ... “The people enjoy listening to speeches but if the candidates do not give any projects or grants to the people then it is like empty talk. Today people vote for the candidates only after they have ‘tasted’ something from the candidates such as projects or grants.”... (Interview with a party leader on 20 March 2002).

It is not difficult for SBN to provide their supporters and allies with those goodies because it has control over the patronage networks. Furthermore the tight nexus between politics and business during the “politics of development” era has expanded the patronage networks and created opportunities for providing more “tangible benefits”. As a result more often than not election in Sarawak is a contest between those who are in control of the patronage networks and those who don’t. Thus it is not difficult to understand why “patronage factor” had influenced the contestation between “blue waves” and “political tsunami” in the 2008 election.

This article is based on series of fieldworks conducted in various districts in Sarawak during the 2006 Sarawak state election and the 2008 general election. Interviews and observations were conducted before and after both elections. Some of the areas covered during the elections and post-elections trips were Kuching, Sri Aman, Betong, Sarikei and Miri. The researcher visited several long houses located in the interior of Sri Aman and Betong divisions to interview several community leaders (*Tuai Rumah*) and members of several political parties. Secondary data for this article were gathered from sources such as newspapers, books and the internet.

ELECTORAL POLITICS

Electoral politics is central for democratic consolidation. Huntington (1989), argues that in order to be called democratic a government must be popularly elected by the people through the ballot box. The irony is that not all popularly

ected government will adhere to the democratic principles. There are cases where states combine many of the forms and features of electoral democracy with the authoritarian structures and powers of a strong state (Crouch, 1996). Andreas Schedler (2002) goes a step further by introducing a new category called "electoral autocracies" for countries that violate democratic norms. Elections may also become a mechanism for legitimizing authoritarian rule (Puthuchery and Noraini 2005: 1).

Crouch (1996: 8) argues that Malaysian politics in general revolve around issues linked to race. In the case of Sarawak, electoral politics is always interesting because it sets in motion both patronage and ethnic politics. Politicians often drum up ethnic issues for securing political support and reward their supporters with handouts or tangible benefits in order to sustain their support. Being an 'easy issue' (in the words of Carmine & Stimson 1989: 11) it is not difficult to understand why ethnicity is very marketable. Ethnic is 'easy issues' that need no high cost and profound knowledge to obtain information on it. Ethnicity has rich emotional energy and great mobilization capacity and it attracts elites to manipulate it politically. As far as Sarawak is concerned, ethnic politics is closely related to patronage politics.

More often than not Sarawak Barisan Nasional (SBN) portrays itself as a political machine that has excellent patronage networks. The party's patronage network has been deeply rooted and it reaches the grassroots voters in the periphery or rural areas. On the other hand, the opposition parties do not have established networks. They also do not have enough resources to distribute to their supporters in return for their support. As a result they could not match the ruling party.

Politics is expensive in Sarawak. A substantial amount of money is needed for party building, buying-off political opponents to change parties, buying political support during party elections, and electioneering costs. To reach the party members in the isolated hinterland requires months of slow and expensive travel (*FEER* 10 October 1991; Cooke 1999: 87). Large amount of funds is needed for party building which includes managing party offices and electioneering costs. The cost is much higher during elections because they have to mobilise support covering large constituencies with poor infrastructure. Some candidates claimed to spend millions out of their own pockets to meet electioneering costs (*Borneo Post* 25 August 1996). Moreover, an election is sometimes regarded as another form of festival when supporters expect politicians to 'pour their money' (in Iban: *mubuhka duit*). Voters tend to perceive that once the candidate decides to contest in the elections, he or she is prepared to spend on the voters. Voters expect free transportation, free meals and more 'goodies' (projects) to be distributed during elections. One community chief from a remote long house in Sri Aman told me how they reacted: ... "When politicians give us money we must take it because we know that they will disappear after the elections..." (Interview with one headman on 20 May 2006).

Sarawak is also known for 'money politics'. In 1997 a High Court judge in Kuching declared the 1996 result in the Bukit Begunan constituency in Sri Aman null and void because of vote buying and as a result a by-election was conducted in March the following year. In politics money works both ways. It can be good for democracy because it helps to mobilise people to take part in electoral politics but it has the potential to corrupt the system too. For example, while in office politicians may abuse their powers in order to make money for the next elections. Huntington (1968: 61) regards vote buying as bribery where one trades political power for money while the other trades money for political power. In both cases something public (a vote, or office or decision) is sold for private gain.

POLITICAL LANDSCAPE PRIOR TO MARCH 2008 ELECTION LAND CONUNDRUM

Basically Sarawak's political landscape did not change much after the 2006 state election. BN remained in power and support for the party remained strong in the rural areas but had declined sharply in urban areas. The significant increase in the number of opposition representatives in the State Legislative Assembly has created an excitement of sorts among the people in Sarawak. The stronger opposition presence was definitely welcomed by those who, for too long, felt that their voices have not been heard in an almost unanimously SBN state assembly. Some of the common topics were land, basic infrastructure, and the prices of commodities. Among the urban voters one issue which remained unresolved was pertaining to land. Many Chinese voters felt that SUPP was too slow and failed them on this issue. After the 2006 election they continued to insist that the renewal of their land titles, which will expire in next few years to be done automatically. They also asked for a lower premium for their land. To assuage their supporters SUPP set up service centers to help its members deal with the issues. However, critics claimed that the move was too little and too slow.

Among the rural voters land is always a political issue. The Native Customary Rights (NCR) land issue resurfaces in every election but sometimes easily subdued. It becomes a conundrum as there were myriad of court cases between NCR land owners and the logging companies or plantation companies. Besides, the deregistration of PBDS only exacerbated the tense situation. The deregistration of the party by Registrar of Society was construed by its supporters as an attempt to silence the land issue. To ensure continuous support of the Dayaks attempts were made to consolidate Dayaks political power in BN. Leaders of Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS) and Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) mooted the idea of merging the two Dayak-based parties.

As the general election drew nearer land remained a contentious issue. There were no indicators to suggest it would not be one of the main issues in the election. The impact of land issue was expected to be more forceful with both rural and urban voters affected by the same issue.

NATIONALISING SARAWAK'S POLITICS AND OPPOSITION PACT

Since its independence in 1963 Sarawak has been controlled by Sarawak-based political parties. Critics of SBN often argued that Sarawakians could bring their predicament to the attention of the federal government more effectively if the current regional-based political parties which dominate Sarawak BN are dismantled.

UMNO followers in Sarawak set up a Protem Committee called *Jawatankuasa Penaja UMNO Negeri Sarawak (JPUNS)*. They were actively recruiting members and setting up branches throughout Sarawak despite the party's dismal performance in 2001 state elections. Interestingly some of the members are from the Dayak communities who believed that UMNO is a bigger boat not only for the Malays. With a "bigger boat", they claimed, their future is much brighter. However, the presence of JPUNS members in Sarawak was criticised by SBN leaders. They argued that UMNO will not come to Sarawak and the fact that the party (Parti Pesaka Bumiputra Bersatu) had signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with UMNO shows that UMNO is not keen to come over.

Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) also made an attempt to spread its wings to Sarawak. PKR came to Sarawak in 1999 and was in oblivion after the party failed to secure any seat in several elections. In 2006 the party won Padungan seat through Dominique Ng. Since then the party made its presence felt in Sarawak. Prior to the 2008 election, PKR had organized several meetings and *ceramah* with its supporters in Sarawak. The attempt to 'nationalise' the state politics not only challenge the political 'arrangement' in the state, but it might change its political landscape as Sarawak is the only state controlled by regional-based parties.

In their attempt to nationalise Sarawak politics the opposition parties rejuvenated the idea of setting up an opposition pact for stronger impact. The opposition pact capitalised on two issues; land issue and the rising price of commodities. They pledged to the people of Sarawak that all BN candidates in the coming election would be challenged. SNAP leader promised that his party would contest in all Dayak seats if there were no takers. However, it was not easy for opposition parties to work together as they needed time to heal their past differences.

Other than their past differences, 'opposition but with BN hearts' is another problem in uniting the opposition parties. As a result they refused to draw a clear battle line with SBN. This made their cause which they struggle for rather blur. Some of them claimed that they were not against BN per se but merely against BN leadership in Sarawak. Others even promised that they would apply to join BN if they win the election. Besides, there were a few who claimed that they had nothing against SBN leaders. They contested against SBN candidates because they felt that the candidates who represented BN were wrongly picked.

Another point of contention among the opposition members was the allocation of seats. They could not decide on who should contest in certain seats. As a result the members often ended up fighting each other. DAP and PKR were at loggerheads over certain seats. A few days before nomination, PKR chief in Sarawak issued a very strong statement condemning DAP... "I think it is just stupidity. That's all, plain stupidity. Not good politics. Their politics is politics of disrespect and politics of confusion. DAP has snubbed us"... (*The Borneo Post* 20 February 2008).

BN IS FOR 'BARANG NAIK'

Several SUPP leaders also attributed the defeat in the 2006 state election due to the hike in fuel price which was announced just before the election. They claimed that the decision of federal leaders to announce the price increase just before the elections was unwise. It became an important issue in Sarawak where support for BN is also a support for price hike. BN leaders in Sarawak found it more difficult to explain to Sarawakians why as an oil producing state they had to pay more for fuel. The debate on price hike continued until the 2008 election.

TAIB - RAHMAN LEGACY CONTINUES

The 'stand-off' between Taib Mahmud and Rahman Yaakub since 1987 had made Sarawak politics more volatile. Rahman Yaakub is Taib Mahmud's uncle and the former Chief Minister of Sarawak (1971-1981). The bad blood between the two can be traced back to the 1980s where Rahman Yaakub openly challenged Taib Mahmud's leadership in Sarawak. The 'peace making' was initiated by Taib Mahmud who organised a birthday party for his uncle Rahman Yaakub at the latter's residence at Demak Jaya. This peace making further strengthened his position as the Chief Minister of Sarawak. Taib Mahmud reiterated that he would stay on as the Chief Minister until he could find a suitable candidate to take over from him. He claimed that he was duty-bound to stay. He reportedly love to leave, but was duty-bound to make sure the high stakes of achievements and well being-being of the state were in good hands (*The Borneo Post* 10 November 2007). According to him his successor would be picked without any contest through a carefully crafted succession plan (*The New Straits Times* 12 February 2007). That statement put to rest another round of speculation concerning his position as Sarawak's Chief Minister. That announcement also meant no transition of power in Sarawak would take place before the 2008 elections.

The protracted land issue, the high price of commodities, the nationalising of Sarawak politics and the "peace-making" between Taib Mahmud and Rahman Yaakub were the issues that dominated domestic politics in Sarawak prior to the

2008 election. The contestation between 'blue waves' and 'political tsunami' need to be understood in the light of those issues as well.

THE 2008 GENERAL ELECTION

For Sarawak, general election was often less exciting compared to the state election. Sarawak voters are very into themselves and quite "insulated" from the mainstream national politics. When the dissolution of the national parliament was announced in February 2008 all parties were ready for another round of battle. SBN was still grappling with delicate issues such as the status of the former PBDS and partyless parliamentarians and also the allocation of new seats among its component parties. Three new seats were created in Sarawak following the delineation of the electoral boundaries. SUPP, one of the SBN component parties, had asked for one of the seats but Taib Mahmud finally decided that all the seats be given to PBB. He argued that PBB is the backbone of SBN and therefore PBB deserved to be allocated all the new seats. Apparently, SUPP's poor performance in 2006 state elections caused the party to have less political leverage when come to bargaining for the new seats. The issue of partyless parliamentarians was resolved when all the 'partyless' *wakil rakyat* were asked to join Parti Rakyat Sarawak to enable them to defend their seats. There was backroom lobbying from both factions in Parti Rakyat Sarawak (*The New Straits Times*, 7 March 2008). Several incumbents were not nominated to defend their seats. This had resulted in back stabbings or planting of independent candidates to challenge fellow SBN candidates during the election.

On nomination day SBN won four seats uncontested and three days later another candidate withdrew and BN won another seat. With that SBN had secured five seats. In 2004 SBN won a few seats uncontested as well. Major political parties contested in the elections were SBN, Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Sarawak National Party (SNAP) and Parti Islam seMalaysia (PAS) (Table 1). A total of 60 candidates contested vying for 26 seats. The campaigning period was set for eleven days and polling was held on 8 March 2008.

ISSUES: DEVELOPMENT, LAND AND PRICES OF COMMODITIES DEVELOPMENT

Basically there were no new issues cropped up in 2008 election. The same issues used in 2006 were recycled in 2008. The three main issues that resurfaced and took the centre stage again were land, development and prices of commodities.

As usual the SBN leaders urged the voters to continue their support for SBN to ensure continuity of the 'Politics of Development'. In the words of SBN

TABLE 1. State of Political Parties Contested in 2008

Political Parties	Number of Candidates
Barisan Nasional	
Parti Pesaka Bumiputra Bersatu (PBB)	14
Sarawak United Peoples' Party (SUPP)	7
Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP)	4
Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS)	6
Sub-total	31
Democratic Action Party (DAP)	7
Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)	12
Sarawak National Party (SNAP)	3
Parti Islam seMalaysia (PAS)	1
Independents	13
Sub-total	36
Total	67

Source: *The Borneo Post*. 26 February 2008

supporters a support for SBN was a support for development while those who opposed were dubbed by SBN supporters as 'anti-development'. SBN leaders also claimed that they have good track record and they often recited those achievements while campaigning in their constituencies. Apparently remembering favours is the foundation of electoral politics.

The perception that only by supporting BN that the people will get development projects was challenged by the opposition when they argued that development was a right and that no one should be deprived of that right. The government, they argued, is obliged to look after the people and to provide development for all of them. The opposition also charged that development in Sarawak was tainted with corruption. One of their posters reads, "BN Development Must Be Checked". The opposition alleged that the Sarawak government is corrupt and that the voters must change it. One DAP poster reads Corrupt BN + Corrupt Police + High Crime Rate. Similar messages were sent via e-mail, short messaging system and "blogs" in the internet. The opposition also claimed that BN leaders did not have the political will to wipe out corruption.

It has been more or less a practice for SBN leaders to use development projects as patronage tools during their elections campaign. Opposition candidates argued that it is not right and fair for SBN candidates to announce projects during elections. The Sarawak state government announced a few millions ringgit for the development of Chinese schools in the state. One SUPP leader reminded the Chinese voters that areas controlled by the opposition are not entitled to any development fund from the state government (*The Borneo Post* 28 February 2008). The statement also meant if the area is won by the opposition

then the people will be deprived of development fund. Similar tactic has been used for quite sometimes. For example, Searle (1983: 137) made a similar observation twenty years ago when he says, ... "only headmen and long houses that supported the government parties would obtain projects or development schemes"... A few days before polling a rural electrification project in Lubok Antu worth RM3.5 million was launched by the Chief Minister, Taib Mahmud, when he campaigned for BN candidate in that area. The project benefited at least five Iban longhouses (*The Borneo Post* 7 March 2008). Taib Mahmud also launched another government project worth RM2.2 million in Meludam on 4 Mac 2008. Several SUPP leaders also announced the setting up of a private university in Bintangor (*The Borneo Post* 6 March 2008).

Apparently the "development card" is popular among the candidates. SBN leaders claimed that developments only come with the support for the government while the opposition parties argued that development is a right and that no one should be deprived of it even if they do not support the government. It seems that the educated working class and urban voters are more aware of their rights compared to their counterparts in the rural areas. Like the 2006 state election land issue resurfaced in both urban and rural areas.

LAND ISSUE

In Sarawak, land issue has been a political issue in every election especially among the Native Customary Rights (NCR) land owners in the rural areas. In the 2008 election land turned out to be one of the main issues for both urban and rural voters. In the 2006 state election SUPP was accused of failing the Chinese voters when the party failed to convince the state leadership to meet the demand of the landowners whose land lease were about to expire within the next few years. A total of 7,147 land titles are expected to expire in 2010 (*The Borneo Post* 20 August 2007). The land owners also asked for lower premium and that the renewal to be made automatic. However, the state leadership objected and argued that the premium was reasonable and that the new land lease renewal was a sound policy (*The Borneo Post* 20 August 2007). The position taken by the government on that issue did not seem to go down well among the voters and the issue resurfaced in the 2008 election. The landowners also requested that the government should return to them their land which was acquired under Section 47 of the Sarawak Land Code. According to them some of the land was never utilised for 'public purpose' as claimed by the government when they made the compulsory acquisition for those land earlier.

Among the NCR landowners the fear is that they would lose their land in the name of development. There was growing disenchantment concerning land development in Sarawak. The opening up of more land for large scale plantation in Sarawak had aggravated the situation. NCR land owners complained that the

private companies or government agencies trespass their land and the fact that some of them won their cases shows that their claims were not baseless.

From the opposition point of view, SBN should be held responsible for the 'loss' of NCR land in Sarawak. An independent candidate for Sri Aman reiterated his claim that the government grabbed NCR land from the natives. He asserted that he contested to challenge the ruling party, BN, to defend NCR land and urged the Dayaks to support him. He named a few companies (Kumpulan Sama SB, Melor Gemilang SB, Daya Khas SB) that allegedly grabbed the NCR land and claimed that those companies are linked to the power holders. To appease the landowners the state government issued land titles and such events were widely published. However, it was easier for SBN leaders to 'pacify' landowners in rural areas by paying compensation and giving away land titles. This was not the case for urban voters who were still furious over the high premium that they had to pay when they renewed their land lease.

PRICES OF COMMODITIES

Debates on the prices of commodities continued in the 2008 election. In its election manifesto BN highlighted the impact of the price hike on the people and outlined several measure to lighten the burden of the people such by providing free textbook for school children, examination fees were abolished, minimum medical fee at government's clinics and more low cost housing for the poor (BN Manifesto 2008). However the opposition linked the rising prices of commodities to the poor management of public funds by BN government. The issues were linked to rampant corruption, abuse of power and numerous financial scandals which involved public funds. As for the price of oil, the people of Sarawak should not pay more for their petrol as it is an oil producing state (Brochure entitled 'Sebab DAP menentang Harga Minyak' issued by DAP Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur). DAP pushed for change of government using their slogan 'Just Change It'. To them the acronym 'BN' stands for "Barang Naik". In his response Taib Mahmud put it rather bluntly ... "The voters have to look properly because the price hike is beyond our control. It is a global trend. And to vote against us (BN) just because the price hike is wrong"... (*The Borneo Post* 6 March 2008). The issue resurfaced in all areas in Sarawak.

RESULTS AND VOTING BEHAVIOUR

The results of 2008 Election Showed that voting pattern did not depart from the 2006 state election. Firstly, the electoral result was in favour of SBN. It repeated the 2004 victory and lost only one seat to opposition party, DAP. Interestingly the incumbent from DAP, Chong Chieng Jen retained the seat with a bigger

majority. In 2004 Chong won with a majority of 2,041 votes and in 2008 his majority swelled to 7,000 votes. Though the party only won one seat but DAP managed to secure more votes in urban areas.

Secondly, the marked decline in the percentage of popular votes secured by SBN candidates in urban areas in 2008 compared to 2004 (Table 2) shows that voters in urban areas indeed experienced a 'political tsunami'. SUPP candidate for Sarikei won with a razor thin victory of 51 votes while his predecessor won the seat for SBN with a much bigger majority of 11,599 votes in 2004. One observer opined that SUPP was more or less saved by the Dayak and Malay voters in Sibul (40 percent Dayak and Malay voters), Lanang (36 percent Dayak and Malay voters) and Stampin (20 percent Dayak and Malay voters), and Sarikei (32 percent Dayak and Malay voters). In those constituencies DAP lost to SUPP by less than 5,000 votes. In the case of Bandar Kuching where the Dayak and Malay voters were less than 10 percent, SUPP lost (*The New Straits Times* 11 March 2008). Based on the results above, suffice to say that the support for SBN (via SUPP) in the urban areas has eroded dramatically. If the election results in the urban constituencies are anything to go by then one could say that the disillusioned urban voters had vented their frustration on SBN by voting for opposition parties.

Thirdly, like the 2006 state election the rural voters continued their support for SBN. The party lost only two seats in the rural areas compared to seven in the urban areas. In the 2008 election the rural voters reiterated their support for SBN candidates. This is evident when almost all SBN candidates in rural areas won with increased popular votes compared to the 2004 election. Basically SBN's strength lies in the rural areas. Other than Dayak majority constituencies SBN also secured support in Malay-Muslim majority constituencies. For example, SBN won two seats uncontested in Muslim majority seats. However, the support for SBN candidates shows a slight decline in a few Malay-Muslim majority areas. Basically the support for SBN came from *bumiputera* group. One commentator summarises their support for SBN in the following words:

Dayaks and Malays voted for SBN in every election because BN means development. To them, the government has the capacity to provide things such as roads, generators and community halls. These amenities mean a lot to the rural people. They were doubtful whether they would continue to get these amenities if they voted for the opposition. The general belief among the Dayaks and Malays is that there is no alternative to the BN government. (*The New Straits Times* 11 March 2008).

One thing for sure is that the rural voters who had rallied behind SBN in 2006 anticipated more developments in rural areas. Among the rural voters who gave unwavering support to SBN, it is only logical that they should anticipate more intensive rural development, especially under the Ninth Malaysia Plan. Besides, they want to see the slogan 'more seats, more power, more development' (In Iban: *mayuh kerusi, mayuh kuasa, mayuh pemansang*) materialise.

TABLE 2. Popular Votes: General Election of 2004 and 2008

Constituencies	Voting Percentage		Majority		Popular votes	
	2004	2008	2004	2008	2004	2008
P192 Mas Gading	65.12	67.37 (+)	2,712	4,301	57.35	58.63 (+)
P193 Santubong	64.13	64.73 (-)	10,560	11,945	86.10	80.38 (-)
P194 Petra Jaya	61.46	61.74 (+)	12,816	14,397	77.08	79.22 (+)
P195 Bandar Kuching	63.06	68.13 (-)	2,041	9,952	53.02	63.88 (+)
P196 Stampin	59.87	65.30 (+)	7,731	3,070	61.17	51.01 (-)
P197 Kota Samarahan	UC	75.14	UC	11,411	UC	75.51
P198 Mambong	61.96	61.71 (-)	9,098	6,657	71.02	65.33 (-)
P199 Serian	59.13	66.36 (+)	9,695	13,427	76.5	86.97 (+)
P200 Batang Sadong	64.17	66.21 (-)	9,732	5,425	91.23	74.79 (-)
P201 Batang Lupar	UC	64.21	UC	8,092	UC	77.67
P202 Sri Aman	55.3	60.31 (+)	4,368	4,252	64.56	64.03 (-)
P203 Lubok Antu	68.79	69.97 (+)	2,035	1,610	58.55	56.74 (-)
P204 Betong	66.01	72.22 (+)	9,723	11,709	85.97	87.27 (+)
P205 Saratok	67.8	68.66 (+)	7,545	8,706	72.94	76.81 (+)
P206 Tanjong Manis	NS	NS	NS	UC	UC	UC
P207 Igan	NS	NS	NS	UC	UC	UC
P208 Sarikei	61.8	70.23 (+)	3,818	51	70.70	48.63 (-)
P209 Julau	72.20	65.56 (-)	2,688	7,584	59.54	78.90 (+)
P210 Kanowit	60.62	UC	2,057	UC	59.85	UC
P211 Lanang	63.28	69.54 (+)	4,721	4,864	59.41	57.13 (-)
P212 Sibul	62.82	67.77 (+)	3,345	3,235	54.43	53.37 (-)
P213 Mukah	57.44	63.17 (+)	9,178	6,298	81.69	72.68 (-)
P214 Selangau	60.49	UC	3,616	UC	64.89	UC
P215 Kapit	UC	UC	UC	UC	UC	UC
P216 Hulu Rajang	60.61	63.09 (+)	3,666	2,164	67.91	59.82 (-)
P217 Bintulu	64.95	64.73 (-)	11,267	14,965	63.66	73.17 (+)
P218 Sibuti	NS	NS	NS	3,648	NS	64.21
P219 Miri	UC	60.70	UC	5,216	UC	57.78
P220 Baram	47.21	49.65 (+)	3,310	4,044	64.03	66.92 (+)
P221 Limbang	NS	60.94	NS	676	NS	52.77
P222 Lawas	UC	59.44	UC	7,792	UC	92.07

New seats (NS), Won uncontested (UC)

Source: Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia, <http://www.spr.gov.my/>, 13 March 2008, *Utusan Malaysia* 25 February 2008; *The New Straits Times* 10 March 2008; *The Sunday Post* 9 March 2008

Fourthly, like the previous elections, the '3M factors' (money, media and machinery) also contributed to BN's win in Sarawak. BN monopolised the mainstream media and had accessed to extensive financial resources and manpower compared to the opposition parties. The low level of internet access in the rural areas did not allow the opposition parties to campaign effectively using alternative media such as online newspapers and blogs.

POST 2008 ELECTION

Sarawak politics after the general election was no less exciting. Firstly, one of the frequently asked questions after the election results was known was how many federal portfolios will be given to Sarawak? This was in view of Sarawak's contribution to BN's victory. When the line-up of the new cabinet was announced there were two Ministerial posts and five Deputy Minister's posts given to Sarawak. The marked increase in the number of representatives from Sarawak roped in to serve in the Federal Cabinet was ostensibly to reciprocate Sarawak's contribution. The reactions to the announcement in Sarawak were mixed. Taib Mahmud applauded the Prime Minister's announcement. The announcement upset the Bidayuh community in Sarawak who felt that they were not represented in the Federal Government and in their own words ... "being removed from the equation"... To assuage the Bidayuh communities the Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi, appointed Tike Lafe as the new Chairman for National Service Training in September 2008 and in December 2008 his deputy, Najib Razak, announced three million ringgit grant for the construction of Dayak Bidayuh National Association headquarters in Kuching (Bernama 13 December 2009).

Secondly, the expectation for more development funds for Sarawak was high. As they flexed their electoral muscles the voices of people in Sarawak and Sabah asking for more development funds were getting louder. During his visit to the neighbouring state of Sabah, Prime Minister, promised the people of Sabah that more development funds would be channeled to Sabah. Like their counterparts in Sabah political leaders in Sarawak also asked for higher oil royalty to be given to Sarawak by the Federal Government in view of the increasing costs of living. It is also argued that the five percent given to Sarawak is not enough as Sarawak is one of the backward states in the country.

Thirdly, the post-election scenario in Sarawak also became more exciting with several attempts by PKR leaders to win the support of several BN representatives in Sarawak. At one time the de facto leader of PKR, Anwar Ibrahim, claimed that several BN representatives had agreed to join PKR at anytime. Anwar Ibrahim announced the date 16 September 2008 as the day when the new government under his leadership will be formed. Of course the date is close to the hearts of people in Sabah and Sarawak because that was the actual independence date for both states. This claim sent chills down the spine of several BN leaders. Those rumours also prompted the Prime Minister to come for a short visit to Sarawak where he met all the BN elected representatives at a closed door meeting. The Prime Minister promised he would consider the requests from Sabah and Sarawak BN to increase the number of ministers from the two states in the federal cabinet (*The Borneo Post* 8 April 2008). DAP leaders in Sarawak also enticed the Dayak representatives to cross over to the opposition. The Dayaks were offered the Chief Minister's post in Sarawak if they 'jump ship' (*The Borneo Post* 20 June 2008). Sarawak DAP leader, Wong Ho Leng, even

suggested that an Iban from Sarawak should be made the Deputy Prime Minister (*The Borneo Post* 18 March 2008). Though the plan to form a new government on 16 September 2008 did not materialise, but Anwar Ibrahim reminded the thirty members of parliament from Sarawak that they hold the key for the Pakatan Rakyat government in the country (Bernama 16 November 2008).

Fourthly, if the decline of popular votes among the incumbents from SBN in the urban areas is anything to go by then the results of the 2008 election augur well for opposition politics in Sarawak. Upbeat with the electoral outcome the opposition parties are preparing another assault on SBN in the coming state election due in 2011. PKR leaders were optimistic that they can make inroads to Dayak majority constituencies. To consolidate their strength several leaders from Sarawak National Party (SNAP) and Malaysian Dayak Congress (yet to be registered) decided to join PKR. On 25 April 2008 reportedly a total of seventeen leaders from the opposition parties (SNAP, PKR and MDC) decided to join PKR (*The Borneo Post* 25 April 2008). However, cooperation between DAP and PKR is not going to be easy in Sarawak. According to one DAP leader ... "I see the possible cooperation among us but the only stumbling block is Dominique Ng (PKR Sarawak Chairman)" ... (*The Borneo Post* 3 April 2008). Both parties had been at loggerheads especially over the allocation of seats in the past elections. This resulted in the two parties fighting each other in several constituencies. DAP also reportedly still waiting for Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) to show more sincerity concerning the Islamic state. DAP believes that the secular nature of Malaysia can never be challenged (*The Borneo Post* 15 April 2008)

Fifthly, several months after the idea of electoral pact among the opposition parties was mooted it was put to test in the Batang Ai by-election held in April 2009. The by-election was an early preview of the state election which is not due until 2011. The by-election was held following the death of Assistant Minister, Dublin Unting, who was also the Secretary General for Parti Rakyat Sarawak. PKR fielded a former five-term Member of Parliament for Lubok Antu, Jawah Gerang as a candidate. He was formerly with Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS) and joined PKR in December 2008. Jawah was challenged by Malcom Mussen Lamoh from Barisan Nasional. The election was a litmus test for PKR in Dayak majority areas. The BN candidate won the election and the defeat was a wake-up call for PKR leaders in Sarawak who had claimed that the party was getting popular among the rural voters in Sarawak especially the Dayaks. Of course for SBN the challenge is much greater as promises and pledges made during the by-election campaign must be fulfilled before the coming state election.

PROSPECTS

In less than two years Sarawak will face another state election. The current term dues in July 2011. The current political temperature suggests that it will be an

interesting one. The presence of more political parties will definitely makes democracy in Sarawak more robust. The opposition parties are now talking about creating a stronger opposition pact. Within SBN two of its component parties are contemplating to merge. Parti Rakyat Sarawak and Sarawak People Progressive Democratic Party are currently on the brink of forming a new party. The discussions on the merger of the two parties had been going on for several years and they are yet to come out with a concrete outcome.

One thing for sure is that the Chief Minister, Taib Mahmud, is likely to stay. Unlike UMNO and MCA there is no indication that the state leadership will be handed over to the younger blood. It is highly unlikely that he will step down before the state election. He argued that it is his responsibility to carry on the task as Chief Minister until someone suitable can lead the state. Interestingly the 2008 election also saw the emergence of Taib Mahmud and Rahman Yaakub family members into Sarawak politics. The son of Taib Mahmud, Sulaiman Taib, took over Samarahan parliamentary seat from his father, Taib Mahmud. He whizzed up and was appointed as deputy minister in the federal cabinet. The daughter of Rahman Yaakub, Nora Abdul Rahman, was nominated for the new seat and won uncontested. It seems that the two families are now being represented both in the federal and state levels. At the state legislative assembly the families are represented by Taib Mahmud (Balingian) and his brother Onn Mahmud (Muara Tuang) while Nora Abdul Rahman and Sulaiman Taib are at the national parliament. It is interesting to see whether the two cousins are able to climb up the notches like their fathers. This development begs the question of whether they are going to continue the Rahman-Taib legacy which to date have helmed Sarawak for a total of 35 years?

How about the voices of the rural voters? Will they get what they have been asking for? One SBN leader asserted that SBN's power base is in the rural areas. He is not wrong if the electoral outcomes of the two elections are anything to go by. It is not difficult for SBN to maintain its grip on the rural areas as long as its leaders deliver what they have promised during the elections. The bottom line is that the people in rural areas want more development. Voters believe that more seats meaning more power and more developments (*mayuh kerusi, mayuh kuasa, mayuh pemansang*). ... "What is the point of having more seats and more power if we cant have more development?" ... a rural voter asked. To them a strong government that could not deliver is just like a warrior who has the "amulet" but don't use it to go to war. In Iban: *Sepemansai pan batu chanai enti enda dipumai nadai meh bulih padi, segantang pan batu lua kenyalang enti enda ditandangka nyerang enda meh ngasuh berani* (Interview with a voter from Saratok on 3 March 2008).

Despite the setback in the April 2009 by-election the opposition pact in Sarawak is preparing themselves for another round of battle in the coming state election where contestation between 'blue waves' versus 'political tsunami' will take place. The results of the 2006 state election and the 2008 election suggest

that it is easier for 'new politics' to penetrate and set foot in urban areas where voters are less dependent on government for development projects. However, in the rural areas it is difficult to win the hearts of the voters if the candidates do not have the capacity to dish out some tangible benefits. Patronage politics is still deeply entrenched and voters are driven by desire to fulfill their basic needs. Voters in the rural areas will support candidates whom they think have the capacity to fulfill their basic needs.

CONCLUSION

The contestation between 'blue waves' and 'political tsunami' in the 2008 election had impacted the electoral outcome in the urban areas resulted in SBN candidates won with slim and reduced majority. Unlike rural voters, urban voters were more concerned with bigger issues which are beyond merely fulfilling their basic needs. After all most of them have their basic needs fulfilled. They are concerned with issues such as human rights, integrity, transparency and accountability. They are more aware of their rights to development and that the government should develop their areas even if they do not support the ruling party. In the rural areas politics is still very much driven by the urge to fulfill basic needs and the use of 'development card' plays an important role in winning their political support. One thing for sure is that the playing field was not level where SBN has the upper hand because it controls the patronage networks and able to reciprocate their supporters and allies by giving them some 'tangible benefits'.

The contestation between 'blue waves' and 'political tsunami' will continue in the coming state election. If the result of the Batang Ai by-election in April 2009 is anything to go by then 'politics of developmentalism' is likely to stay. While urban voters will definitely provide some 'oxygen' for 'new politics' to survive the contest in the rural constituencies will be between those who are in control the political patronage and those who don't. Thus, the number of seats that each party may win in the 2011 election hinges on their capacity to campaign using the 'development card' and also to reciprocate their supporters and allies with some "tangible benefits".

NOTE

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