

## A town at the crossroads

May 15, 2010



Bridget Welsh

Malaysia's 11th by election since March 2008 is only one day away. It comes on the heel of the important BN win in Hulu Selangor and before the much anticipated Sarawak state elections.

For the ruling BN, and Prime Minister Najib Razak in particular, this election provides an opportunity to convince voters nationally and his Umno party that he has a national mandate and can deliver the votes.

For the opposition Pakatan Rakyat, this contest provides a chance to stem the momentum of the BN in gaining support, further forge relations among the opposition component parties and even the score in the now increasingly important and contested marker of two-thirds in Parliament due to PKR defections.

A strong victory for BN may even open the way for early national elections. No doubt this by-election has national importance. The town on the mighty Rajang River has come into the national spotlight, although few Malaysians have visited it.



Allow me to provide some context for [two analyses](#) that will follow. Sibu is a wonderful charming town that has historically played a crucial role in the development of Sarawak as the centre for the timber trade and a financial hub.

The boom years of the 1980s and 1990s translated into the creation of an economically wealthy elite tied closely to the state government of Chief Minister Taib Mahmud. This elite comprises a crucial group within the SUPP, and have lived relatively autonomously from the federal government, although their wealth in newspapers and the corporate world has had national importance.

Politically, the ties of ordinary voters with West Malaysia are weak as the impact of the federal government in bringing infrastructural development and prosperity has been relatively minimal, especially compared to Miri, Bintulu and Kuching. Thus, it is ironic that Sibu now plays a crucial role in setting the direction nationally.

### Unresolved issues

Most in Sibu are hard-working small businessmen, entrepreneurs whose personal investment and grit have paid off, labourers in the service sector, small farmers and civil servants. There are only a handful of professionals.

The economic vitality of the boom years did trickle down to the community for a number of decades as many fulfilled their dreams of home ownership and financial security. The majority of Chinese in the area are Foochow, who are known for their economic success and strong support of their community.

Others are Henghua, who retain strong ties to their identity, Iban and Malay/Melanau and a handful of Orang Ulu, Indians, Bidayuh and other indigenous groups. All are genuine straight-forward people who have saved for their children, most of whom left Sibu for their education and jobs. Population levels have declined overall, largely as a result of emigration. Some of this has been offset by migration from nearby rural areas.

Like those in many Malaysian towns, the focus of



residents is not politics. Concerns with family and community run deep in this relatively conservative town. 'Politics' is a distant phenomenon, brought home only irregularly every few years during elections.

Yet, the failed resolution of political issues and weak governance are felt every day by Sibuan.

Unresolved land rights and land leases underscore concerns for economic security. Land issues are intertwined with bread-and-butter issues of employment and wages. There is a strong sense of community in the clan associations, religious organisations and local triads, which reinforce a parochial orientation.

### Decline and neglect

The mood is less optimistic than it once was during my first visit here in the 1990s. Over the last decade, the town has suffered a relative decline as the timber sector has contracted. Most in Sibuan are facing a more uncertain future. Employment opportunities are scarce, with wages shockingly low. Many earn less than RM500 a month.

Costs are higher in Sarawak, and thus the gap between income and needs is even wider than in West Malaysia. Sarawak is after all the poorest state in the country, despite its oil and gas wealth, and, sadly, in Sibuan it shows. Some everyday costs are offset by a robust illegal economy and smuggling trade, but overall the cost of living is high and many live frugally.



The community that feels the economic pinch the hardest is arguably the Iban, who comprise 15 percent of the voters. Poverty remains a serious challenge in this community, with many live on the edge. The longhouses are emptying out, as many young Iban leave in search of a future, leaving behind their parents and in some cases their wives.

Many of the Malays and Melanau who comprise 17 percent of the voters face a similar struggle, especially for the more remote communities that have been relocated further from the city centre.

While the town has developed roads and facilities and is wired with Internet access, it suffers from regular flooding and a degree of neglect, as the shine of the boom years has rubbed off on the declining local infrastructure. Drainage and sewage disposal remain below standard, despite the wealth of Sibuan's famous tycoons.

### Changing fortunes

Sibuan reflects transformations taking place in Sarawak as a whole. Not coincidentally, geographically the town stands at the crossroads of the rural and urban nexus in the centre of the state.

Like in Sabah, there has been increasing development of the plantation economy in Sarawak, which has not generated adequate local employment and increased inequalities and food insecurity. This has given more power to outsiders and exacerbated economic inequalities. Unlike Kuching, which is relatively thriving, Sibuan is hurting economically.

For Sibuan, the national question of what will be the engine of growth and how will the country get there is especially pertinent as it now stands at a crossroads. It remains unclear how Sibuan will continue to thrive financially. Hope is being placed on the shipping and service sectors.



The role that the state and federal government will play in the economic expansion of the town is more opaque than it was earlier, pointing to a real challenge for BN to show that it can deliver new concrete development opportunities.

Sibu, like many Malaysian towns, is full of potential and awaiting investment, despite the fact that its tycoons are concentrating on their investments elsewhere.

Politically, the ties to the state government are also no longer as central as they once were, as the reliance on state contracts has ebbed. Many, although not all, businessmen are investing outside of the state and increasingly operating independently.

### **Fragmentation of political power**

The economic transformation has coincided with loss of political clout for local communities. The role of Chinese Sarawakians, for example, has eroded.

This is best seen in the political power of the SUPP, whose role as representing the Chinese in Sarawak has been undermined by its losses in the 2006 state elections, the perceived weak and compromised leadership of Dr George Chan, intense party infighting - even in Sibu - and, more fundamentally, less substantive engagement with the ordinary person on the street.

Similar to what has happened in Sabah, politically the Chinese Sarawakians have been sidelined, as their traditional 'kingmaker' role has evolved into more leaving the 'court' for their own endeavours with large numbers leaving the 'kingdom' altogether. This change has contributed to the increasing Chinese Sarawakians exodus to the DAP.



The change of the Chinese follows the earlier pattern of the marginalisation of the Iban community. In the late 1980s, redelineation removed the two local Iban-majority seats in the area, resulting in the Iban community losing political representation.

This fragmentation of political power has continued in the Iban political parties and been exacerbated by infighting. Respected and autonomous local Iban leaders are scarce. Not surprisingly, the level of demoralisation among the Iban community is high.

For the Malays and Melanau, there is, in contrast, a sense of representation. They do feel included and have a voice through the chief minister, but some in the local kampungs express a sense of being taken

for granted.

They openly question the distribution of wealth in the Malay community, particularly with the high-profile visits of leaders from the Semanjung.

### **Common concerns**

All of the communities share strong feelings about their long-time chief minister, Abdul Taib Mahmud.



For his supporters, there is real concern about his health and the unresolved succession plan, even in his party PBB. For his detractors, there is open disdain for his and his family's wealth and alleged corruption and abuses of power.

More than any other issue, the CM provokes strong reactions. All acknowledge that the leadership of Sarawak is facing a

crossroads, like the town of Sibu itself.

This by-election serves to draw more attention to the challenges ahead, but, to date, has offered few solutions to address them. It is thus understandable that the level of engagement with this by-election by Sibuan has been muted and the level of fence-sitters relatively high.

The campaign remains fluid and uncertain, much like the state leadership as well as the political and economic transformations in Sarawak as a whole.

DR BRIDGET WELSH is associate professor of political science at Singapore Management University. She is in Sibu to observe the by-election. Welsh can be reached at [bwelsh@smu.edu.sg](mailto:bwelsh@smu.edu.sg).