



Sea change in Sibü



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The moment I sensed a sea change in the Sibü by-election campaign was during the Friday ceramah, two days before polling. The event reminded me of a similar mood on the eve of the Sarawak state polls in Kuching. The momentum was clearly moving in the opposition's favour.

The votes are now counted and the opposition managed to pull off an extremely close victory of 1% majority in the final tally. Coming after the defeat in Hulu Selangor and without expectations, this victory was especially sweet for Pakatan Rakyat and bitter for BN, particularly those with personal stakes in the contest, namely Prime Minister Najib Razak and Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud.

The blame game has begun within the BN camp as the shock has yet to subside. The reasons for this close victory are multiple and cannot be boiled down to specific individuals or communities. This piece focuses on the factors that were decisive in the campaign for both sides.

My final piece on Sibü tomorrow will showcase an analysis of the results and flesh out the political implications of these results.

What went right for Pakatan

Pakatan's victory was really a combination of factors, from the fairer electoral process to effective machinery cooperation.

1) Fairer electoral process

In rural areas such as Sibü in Sarawak, the BN is used to being able to control the election process. This is especially the case in areas where parties with weak machinery such as DAP, which lacks the manpower to staff polling stations.

This time around, working with PAS and PKR, the DAP was able to enforce greater accountability, calling BN to task over inadequate documentation (by sending 12 unauthorised polling agents back to search for the candidate for their papers) and verifying the eligibility of the voters.

When the final tally was counted, the Election Commission eventually agreed to reject 208 of the postal votes (with some tense moments), and in their normal checking at the polling stations ensured that all voters who did vote had proper documentation. Affecting hundreds of voters, the impact of this routine checking, which was unprecedented in Sibü, was more than the final majority.



From their unprecedented presence in the longhouses to the watchful eyes on the postal votes, Pakatan's strength on the ground machinery was one of the most decisive factors shaping the outcome. On its part, the Election Commission deserves recognition for following their overall professional adherence to the law.

It is important to understand that the Sibü seat has been constructed to be a safe seat for the BN, as it includes 2,571 postal votes and is significantly gerrymandered to include Malay/Melanau villages (some relocated from the city centre) and quite a number of remote Iban voters. The fact that the process was fairer helped offset some of the inherent inequalities in the uneven playing field.

2) Lesson on cooperation from Hulu Selangor

This campaign was perhaps the best oiled campaign for Pakatan, even stronger than Permatang Pauh of August 2008. What made it so effective was a combination of commitment to Pakatan on the part of the campaigners and teamwork.

Unlike the massive numbers of volunteers in Hulu Selangor and presence of many leaders (some of whom chose to languish in resorts rather than actually go to the ground), those that flew across the South China Sea were there to work.

Fewer in number, they concentrated their efforts early on and focused on targeted areas - with PAS in the Malay areas, PKR concentrating in Iban longhouses and DAP walking the urban Chinese town. Gone (well almost gone) were the egos that undermine cooperation, as the coalition interests surpassed personal and party interests.

They began early, with a strategy and game plan in place before nomination day. This allowed the opposition to use every day of the campaign to its advantage. Remember that this was a BN safe seat, and the opposition had to win over about 10% of the electorate.

The hard knocks of working together in Hulu Selangor made Sibü easier, and this showed in the allocation of counting agents, ceramah composition



and collegial camaraderie. All the opposition campaigners wanted to move beyond the last painful loss in Hulu Selangor.



3) More focused DAP rerun

The messaging of the DAP-dominant campaign echoed that of March 2008 - a focus on change - with the presentation of the team choreographed along the lines of that adopted in Penang. The script had been rehearsed before and the politicians knew their part.

They brought in new players this round - with PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang greeting the crowd in Mandarin - and honed in on the Sarawak chief minister and the issue of corruption. The openly public campaign coincided

with substantive dialogue sessions in closed-door sessions with key local actors in the areas of religious freedom and land rights.

While many in Sibü found some of the national issues alienating, notably the issue of GST (Goods and Services Tax), the ability of the DAP to sharpen a practiced message to a relatively non-politicised electorate worked to its advantage. The messages were focused, sharp and largely consistent.

The reason Pakatan could play a rerun was that they did not have to face the issues of multiple sovereignty. They are in opposition in Sarawak, unlike in Hulu Selangor where they had to address their record in office. This made for an easier and more familiar pattern of campaigning for Pakatan, and contributed to sharp contrasts for voters.

4) Easy Sarawak targets

The terrain was also much easier to sow politically for the opposition. Taib Mahmud's 29-year tenure has created considerable antipathy among voters, with his popularity very low, especially among urban Chinese voters (who I will argue in my next piece were the critical swing voters).

It is not just Taib himself, but the perceptions of corruption and cronyism. These are core issues within

the reformasi agenda of the opposition and thus reinforced the focused messaging. While Taib was more of the opposition's focus, the local component party of the BN, the SUPP, was also seen as weak as its leader's personal ties to the CM spilled over to the SibU polls.

Consistently, voters spoke angrily about white elephant projects, unfair contract allocations and unequal distribution of resources. The call by BN that the opposition were "liars" only backfired as many SibU voters believed that "enough was enough" and sent a protest vote back to Kuching and Kuala Lumpur.

What went wrong for the BN?

5) Najib's tactics, not persona

The BN has established a well-honed practice of using goodies in exchange for votes. Sometimes it is effective, such as in Ijok just before the 2008 general elections, and it is more effective in some communities than others, e.g. Iban areas.



It is expensive and does not engender long-term growth in the economy, and in most cases, fails to bring development to communities although some projects are useful and valued, including the funding for schools.

This use of patronage is common globally, but it is often tied to corruption and cronyism. These were coincidentally the negative push button issues for many voters in SibU. As such, a campaign based primarily on this strategy has limited traction.

More fundamentally, patronage is based on the fact that you know the person giving you the reward. Reciprocity is tied to trust. Many of the "givers" from West Malaysia were unknowns, and the rerun of promising development for issues such as flooding that have been around for more than a decade just did not seem adequately believable for many. They know that election "fire fighting" with money does not address the underlying causes of the fire.

What weakened the effectiveness of "money" further was its delivery. In Rejang Park, Najib threw his last 'Hail Mary' hoping to entice voters on the eve of the polls with an offer of RM5million (for a problem that needs RM1 billion to solve properly). It was crude, as many expressed concerns about the blatant politicking of the "offer". Voters in Rejang Park spoke, as support for the opposition in this Chinese-majority area increased from 62% to 68%.

The disdain was with the method, not the man delivering the message. Najib's popularity was the strongest feature of the BN campaign. It is thus not surprising that he visited SibU four times this year, thrice during the campaign itself.

Instead of deal making and throwing mud, he could have discussed his model for the economy and recent economic successes. Instead of pointing to recognition of his leadership of Malaysia by China and the United States (which is, considering its successes, a given for Malaysia), he could have pointed to his plans of how these countries fit into Malaysia's future.



Voters want leaders who have ideas. These ideas give them hope for the future. The crowd that attended this event genuinely expressed a desire to support their PM, and felt disappointed with the offer of money to fix their drains rather than tap into their dreams.

More broadly, this highlights a consistent pattern in BN campaigning. It speaks to the tendency to talk down to voters, to essentialise their interests as purely material. Sibuh voters may seem simple - due to their straight-forwardness and focus on key priorities such as family and education - but they were not simpletons and many recoiled in anger from this form of this engagement.

6) BN shoddy campaign

The last-minute offers were part of an overall poor campaign, arguably the worst BN campaign since March 2008.

The campaign brought over a few of the posters from Hulu Selangor, but they did not fit into a coherent message. One message was notably missing - 'Mampu Berubah' (Able to change). None of these themes were substantively engaged in the BN ceramah. The messages were confusing and boiled down to 'vote for us because we will actually pay money and we are the government'.

Frankly, this just isn't enough to win votes in a close race and stands in sharp contrast to the efforts of Hulu Selangor.

What compounded the incoherency was SUPP's own rerun. It returned to the issue of the Islamic state that was part of the 2001 state campaign (yes, nine years ago). What the SUPP has failed to appreciate is that the contestation over religious issues in Malaysia is no longer simply about opting for Umno instead of PAS.

Sadly, and perhaps incorrectly, Umno has now been seen as the agent of removing religious rights of minorities in areas such as the Bibles and identity cards. More fundamentally, the engagement over these issues has broadened to civil society, making the debates of the role of religion in Malaysian politics more complex and intense.



The debate also connects into controversial discussions of ethnic identity, as concerns were raised about Perkasa. So, as SUPP showed clever posters of kampung mee and Pakatan leaders sleeping together, they showed limited understanding of the current complexities and, more importantly, an appreciation of ordinary voters' understanding of these complexities.

The SUPP was not ready for this contest as its machinery was poor and its engagement with the more modern campaigning now honed on the Semananjung took hold. Distance from online media, a failure to develop a decent website for the campaign and more, showed a leadership of a party out of touch with its voters, and even more damning, an arrogance that alienated.

They needed to go beyond urging voters to support a man of the past and effectively build up the image of the party candidate as a person of the future.

7) Inexperienced candidate

Beyond the dichotomies I have mentioned earlier before the campaign in [an earlier piece](#), what became clear is that the BN candidate Robert Lau Jr had limited engagement with the electorate.



This is common for a new candidate, and where the party and more experienced politicians come in. The candidate is a respected professional from a successful family. He under-utilised the media and his own insights on the development of Sibiu.

For some, he seemed standoffish, and for others, uncomfortable on the campaign trail. He was at a disadvantage to the DAP candidate, Wong Ho Leng, who is a seasoned politician and as comfortable in a coffee shop as he is in the courtroom.

Mentorship in politics is crucial, and this was lacking on the part of the SUPP.

8) SUPP party infighting

The reason was simple. The party remains in a crisis, provoked by their loss in the 2006 state election and inability to effectively regenerate and connect to Chinese Sarawakians. It is a party at war with itself.

The divisions between Wong Soon Koh (*right*) and others in the party were discussed openly by the electorate, with considerably antipathy towards Wong. This was especially strong in his own state seat where the flooding issues and neglect of infrastructure are shameful.

Rumours circulated that the battle among the tycoons over the direction of SUPP spilled over into the campaign, with claims that workers did not come



to vote due to a lack of encouragement by one of the major tycoons. These lack evidence.

What was clear, however, was that by comparison, SUPP lacked the team spirit of the DAP in this campaign. This extended to the cooler relations with component parties within the BN camp, particularly the relationship with the West Malaysian partners. The sense was that SUPP was unable to effectively move beyond its own concerns to connect with the electorate and its BN partners.

9) The man with the silver hair

In part, this by-election had much to do with the 'white hair' in the room, or rather the campaign trail. The SUPP's own transition, divisions and regeneration are linked to the issue of Taib Mahmud and the leadership succession.

The proud history of the SUPP as a fighter for Sarawak has been overshadowed by the long tenure of the CM and alleged concerns with corruption. The CM's presence in the campaign serves as a lightning rod and gives fodder to the opposition. As the next Sarawak elections loom, this issue perhaps weighs the most on the BN's political future in the state.

As I left Sibü yesterday morning, the sun was coming up with glorious shades of red, paralleling the rich colours of the Rajang River. Sibüans have already moved on to continue their normal lives, many with some extra money in their pocket in what was an expensive election campaign - estimated over RM50 million in allocations and 'grants'.

Yet with the Pakatan victory, voters have sent a message that they want change, but arguably from observations of the Sibü campaign, most of the anger of change is focused on the state of Sarawak itself.



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Tomorrow's piece focuses on an analysis of the voting and its implications.