

Sibu's new political awakening



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Tomorrow is polling day in Sibu. After days of quiet campaigning, there is now finally a growing sense of excitement. This non-political town is having a national awakening as both sides have gone all out to win voters over.

In Sibu square, BN leaders are making earnest appeals to the voters, while the big guns of the Pakatan Rakyat are gearing up for a final ceramah tonight and concentrating their day's activities in the pivotal Iban areas.

Prime Minister Najib Razak is making a personal gamble by returning for the second time in the campaign period to appeal for votes, gambling that his popularity wins support.

Traditionally, local factors and perceptions have shaped the outcome in this constituency of 54,695 voters, and they are still relevant. Increasingly, however, national concerns are swaying voters as Sibuan are recognising their important role in the country's future. And they are feeling a sense of empowerment never felt before.



In this final lap, the opposition is gaining ground in a contest that was initially firm in the hands of the BN. The DAP, working with its Pakatan partners, now has a real fighting chance.

The BN on its part is [doling out goodies](#), making promises and pushing its resources to the maximum for a win. The cool breeze from the Rajang River and a morning drizzle belies the real political heat on the ground.

Stark choices

Sibu voters are faced with contrasting choices for this campaign. Foremost is the choice to vote for money, or vote for change.

It is a 'buy-election' after all and in Sarawak, money politics are the norm. The promises for school funding, flood allocation, new land lease rates ([announced last night](#)) are all part and parcel of election promises.



To this end, BN has the advantage of access to three sources of financial muscle: access to both federal and state resources, as well as the personal resources of the candidate.

Voters have been given 'grants' of RM600,

longhouse *tua* heads allocated RM10,000 to RM20,000 to sway residents, and ordinary voters across the races promised RM100 as an advance on a possible victory, with more cash to come. It is important to understand that these sums are not small change for many impoverished voters.

The combination of development promises - for real problems such as flooding and education - and inflows of cash present difficult choices for voters, particularly those who are less enthusiastic about the ability of the opposition to deliver substantive change.

On its part, the opposition has urged Sibuan voters to vote with their conscience, appealing for the need for a stronger opposition voice in government, and suggesting that a vote for the opposition will in fact bring about more engagement and resources from federal and state leaders.

The latter is doubtful as neglect of this town is deep-seated, but the reality is that the contrast in approach is becoming sharper as the campaign evolves.

BN corners itself

The BN has slowly created its own dichotomy in this campaign: a vote for delivery or vote for discussion.

Their main attack on the opposition appeals to the pragmatism of Sibuan voters. In their mantra label on the opposition as "all talk, no walk", they are focusing on deliverables. This message is couched subtly in a framework that aims to discredit the opposition as a viable coalition partnership and undermine its struggling leadership.

The defections of PKR members, the Islamic state discussion about the DAP's partnership with PAS, the court case against Anwar Ibrahim all comprise this frontal attack on the opposition.

Many Sibuan voters hold deep suspicions of West Malaysia and lack familiarity with national players, and this strategy has confused many voters. This tactic to muddying the waters isn't quite as muddy as the Rajang River, but it has gained traction as the BN has appealed for support as the prime candidate for effective governance.

Ironically, this approach backfires on BN as it opens the ruling coalition to serious questions about what it has delivered in Sibu over the past years. The decades of dire neglect in the state increase the BN's vulnerability.

SUPP in particular is seen as weak and ineffective, and this has forced the BN to turn to Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud (who has considerable political baggage from his 29 years in office) and national leaders such as Najib in framing its engagement with the town.

For the opposition, they face a serious challenge of delivering on their promises, and have been cautious in their promises of deliverables. That caution went out the window last night in the final appeal to make sure that Sibu voters have a national voice.



Voters here are reflecting on the difficult choice of whether they want concrete deliverables or a voice challenging the lack of deliverables.

Local loyalties

These choices are compounded by a difficult decision over the two local boys: the local candidates. It is, after all, a small town with personal and professional ties to both candidates - Robert Lau Hui Yew (*left*) and Wong Ho Leng (*right*).

The SUPP is appealing the electorate to vote for the legacy of the late Robert Lau, to remind voters of the boom years and the former tycoon's contribution to the town.

Meanwhile the DAP has focused on the record of Wong Ho Leng as a fighter against injustice.

The candidates have thus far acted responsibly and avoided personal attacks. The mud in Sibu has stayed in the river instead of being thrown on the campaign trail. This speaks to the shared fraternity and civility of both candidates - both lawyers in a small town - and the quiet dignity of Sibuan in how they conduct their daily lives.



This does not mean that there have not been the occasional swipes, as voters themselves have contrasted the dichotomy of rich and poor, in the upbringing of the SUPP and DAP candidate respectfully.

Both men have baggage, but Robert Lau Jr's lack of political experience and engagement with the electorate, broadly as well as his party's extremely poor machinery, has arguably been more weight to carry around. He has yet to capitalise effectively on his strengths as a member of a powerful tycoon family.

Najib's personal contest

As the awakening evolved in Sibu, there is a growing recognition of the national stakes. Like Hulu Selangor, Najib has made this a personal contest. He has taken a bold risk by putting his credibility on the line.

This shows some degree of daring from a man who has been touted as overly cautious, and signifies how important this contest in a remote town in Borneo means for his leadership. It also shows a degree of increasing confidence, riding on the impressive first quarter economic growth of 10.1 percent.



The reality is that Najib cannot implement needed economic reforms without a mandate,

and cannot introduce a strong economic plan, devoid of a simplistic debate over affirmative action and the NEP, without a clear decisive win.

For Pakatan, this contest has also had real meaning, as a victory here opens up the possibility of winning national power. They desperately need East Malaysian seats to offset PKR defections in West Malaysia to build a credible national alternative.

Voters in Sibuan are beginning to understand this difficult choice - to give a mandate to Najib or to open further opportunities for an opposition which badly needs positive momentum.

Deciding factors

Given the choices for voters, it is thus important to lay out what will shape the outcome on this last day.

1) Changing of the playing field

Little attention has been placed on what may prove ultimately decisive: the changing of election dynamics in Sibuan.

The movement of one army battalion out of the constituency - lowering the votes usually given the BN - and the relocation of one major pro-DAP Chinese polling station to the neighbouring Lanang constituency, involves potentially over 3,000 votes.



The movement favours the BN overall, although it may backfire as it tightens the remaining contests. This voter relocation is important in this close contest, and will put pressure on the need for a high turnout on all sides.

The opposition has strengthened its machinery, and now for the first time can assign polling station agents to areas never covered before - some with previous 99 percent victory to BN. This accountability improves the process overall.

Many voters, however, remain fearful their votes are not secret despite the Election Commission's remarks yesterday which reaffirmed a fair process. Insecurity on the part of many voters remains, as rumours of phantom voters persist.

Tomorrow, the integrity of the election process will be put to the test and it will be the responsibility of the EC to assure that the votes of Sibuan are genuinely and fairly counted.

2) Voter turnout and mobilisation

Every vote will count. This constituency has always had low turnout, less than 70 percent in parliamentary contests, given the high numbers of voters living in remote areas and their "non-political" orientation.

Voter turnout in this race will be very important. Who and how many people come to the

polls will determine the outcome.

A high voter turnout in the Malay and Iban areas will favour the BN, where it has traditionally won over 80 percent of the votes. DAP needs the Chinese voters to show up in droves, as they have secured more than 62 percent of their vote in the past.



I predict that the final majority will be small, less than 3,000 for either side, and thus less than 10 percent of the voters could shape the final outcome.

The major contest now is winning over fence-sitters or newly politicised voters. Voters are engaging like never before, although many remain unsure who to vote for. The BN is relying on financial incentives to mobilise, while the opposition is working on building mood for change.

Given the energy at the ceramah of both coalitions last night, Pakatan is winning support on the ground. The real war will come tonight as the opposition faces off against Najib's personal appeal.

3) Ethnic swings

The fight for votes focuses on winning key ethnic constituencies. The most contested community has been the Iban.

Usually easily bought over, there appears to be more openness to the opposition this round as concerns over poverty and more communication with younger Ibans working outside have raised questions about the relative living standards of this rightfully proud community.

Whoever wins this contest will need an Iban swing. Here the choice for money or change is most stark.

The other two major communities are important as well. DAP gains among the Chinese will give them a victory, if they can push their support level above 72 percent. This is where the issue of candidates and deliverables will be most crucial, although more and more Chinese Sibuan are thinking about the national direction in areas of religious freedom and fair representation.

For the Malay community, the stalwart BN base in Sibuan, any movement will be a bonus for either side.

This contest has had less of the ultra-chauvinist overtones of other by-elections since March 2008, but it's still there and percolating over issues of rights, corruption, distribution and charges of Malay betrayal on the part of the opposition leadership.



The BN needs their Malay base more than ever in this round.

4) Local alliances and gambling

In this heated contest tied to voter mobilisation and ethnic swings, local networks factor in.

Friends supporting friends, calling on others to vote, will matter. Indirect and direct ties to parties will matter. Discussions in the coffee shops, churches and children's day care are intense. Women voters will be decisive as many have not voted before and are less politically mobilised.

Beyond social networks and personal connections to the parties and candidates, the role of the local imam, samseng, clan and professional associations and gambling pools will make a difference.

It is a small town after all, and local leaders and groups have an impact. Traditionally, of these local dynamics the most important has been gambling, as the gaming odds have been manipulated with financial backing to swing votes in favour of one side as voters vote to win their bets in favourable odds.

Given the antipathy of local tycoons - in which the Lau family is a major player - and the closeness of the contest itself, this could also prove important, although this time around, it may not be as crucial a factor as in earlier contests.

Sibuans deserve better

The main gamble that will matter when the contest is over is whether the PM gets his mandate or the opposition gets its momentum, and whether investing personally paid off for Najib or whether bringing in national politics in the form of a multi-ethnic alliance benefited the DAP in Sibu.

The stakes are high and choices difficult. Sibu voters may be waking up to their national role, but are not sure exactly what they are waking up to.

Like most Malaysians, they want (and deserve) a better, more effective, fairer government that allows them to live in peace and prosperity.

They have a dream. Tomorrow they will choose who they will entrust to carry it out.



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