

Surprising signals from Sibü



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The real measure of change among the electorate is how they mark the ballot paper.

This analysis explores how people voted in Sibü, drawing from the polling station results and local interviews. The results from the Sibü by-election point to major transformations in voting behavior in Sarawak.



They show swings among voters of all the different ethnic communities towards Pakatan and consistent youth disenchantment with the BN.

The results also reveal a crack in the rural-urban divide in Sarawak voting. Even the composition of the low voter turnout under close scrutiny points in Pakatan's favour.

The findings suggest that not only has the opposition gained a seat in a historic upset, there is now a major challenge on BN's 'fixed deposit' hold on national and state power.

Impressive Chinese swing for Pakatan

The most obvious development this round is stronger locally-based Chinese support for the opposition. Traditionally Chinese voters have been swing voters, moving toward the government in 1995 and 2004, for example, and away from the BN in 2008.

Within the national picture, Sibü has not experienced the same level of movement. Local factors have driven contests more than national ones. This by-election was an exception.

Moreover, traditionally, the Chinese in Sibü have favoured the BN in greater numbers than in West Malaysia or even Kuching. This contest they moved, and did so, for Sibü, in historic proportions.

There are 46 polling stations in Sibü. Of these, 20 are majority Chinese areas, over 77% Chinese. In March 2008, Chinese support for the opposition was 62%. This time round it jumped to 69%, a gain of 7%. Chinese turnout overall remained the same, at 65%.

The fact that many younger Chinese voters - who were already more inclined in 2008 towards the opposition - did not return home for the by-election in large numbers suggests that more Chinese voted this round.

This is to say that the potential Chinese swing could have been even higher, as Chinese Sibüans showed increasing alienation from the BN.

What were the factors beyond those [discussed yesterday](#) that affected the Chinese? Foremost were concerns over religious freedom and the 'Allah' issue. Sibüans want to be able to read the Bible in



Bahasa Malaysia and to practice one's religion without political interference.

Sibu has a high concentration of Christians, over half the Chinese voters, like other parts of East Malaysia. Concerns were also expressed about Perkasa and ultra-Malay nationalism. Prime Minister Najib Razak made a wise move to cancel the May 13 rally, otherwise the majority for the opposition would have been much larger.

The concerns about racial discourse and ethnic exclusion run deep among Chinese Malaysians, and in Sibu these issues were percolating with the same level of intensity that one finds in West Malaysia.

Sadly, the ultra-Malay chauvinism of Perkasa challenges the credibility of 1Malaysia, which was the rallying cry for the BN symbolically in the Sibu campaign. Many Sibuan asked for more substance for the laudable 1Malaysia goals.



Chinese Sibuan also voted for the opposition due to the sense that their interests are not protected within BN and in government.

There is a real feeling of discrimination and second-class citizenship that does not rest well. This was not helped by perceived weaknesses of SUPP in Sarawak and MCA nationally as advocates.

Compounding the party shortcomings in deliverables to and representation of the Chinese community was a failure in the BN camp to engage in its usual outreach to Chinese social organisations, from clans to secret societies. This vacuum was filled by DAP.

Finally, and perhaps most damning of all, many Chinese Sibuan lost faith in the ability of the federal and state government to create security and opportunities for their children. Many are sending their children abroad for school and work.

They are looking outside of Malaysia for opportunities and the future. They are angry that they cannot live in the home where their family has lived for generations with respect, inclusion and opportunity.

The BN faces an uphill task to win back the confidence of deeply alienated Chinese voters. Economic growth will help, but it will not be enough to substantively address the psychological and structural factors that underlie the raw wounds of exclusion.

Pakatan Delivers the Malays/Melanau

Both sides organised their campaign strategies as a battle for ethnic support upfront. Recognising its disadvantage, the BN concentrated on its base, the Malay and Iban areas. They have always had the advantage in these communities.

This had to do with the shortcomings of the DAP in Sibu, which has not traditionally engaged with these communities, largely due to a lack of familiarity, machinery and resources. In Sibu, and arguably in Sarawak as a whole, the DAP has been seen as a Chinese party.

In this campaign, the DAP was able to engage reach out through Pakatan. At issue was a test for whether the Pakatan partners could deliver the bumiputera base, and whether the DAP could shed its Chinese chauvinist image.

Nationally the crucial contestation is over the Malay vote since it goes to the heart of legitimacy to govern. Since March 2008, the contestation for Malay votes has become fierce. For the BN and Najib, they have worked to increase Malay support to strengthen their mandate, largely by portraying the

view that the opposition has betrayed Malays in their supposed control by the Chinese.

Sadly, this strategy has worked on the ground in places such as Hulu Selangor. Pakatan has faced a growing Malay deficit, as Malay support has declined.

This Pakatan Malay deficit has national implications in that the level of Malay support shapes Anwar Ibrahim's (*left*) appeal for national power and connects into PAS' role within the opposition coalition. More Malay support for Pakatan strengthens the cooperation among the opposition component parties and enhances Pakatan's multi-ethnic credentials.

In this context, any movement in the Malay vote in Sibu was to be sign, a sign of PAS' ability to deliver for DAP, and even more important, a sign of the appeal of either national Malay leader Najib or Anwar to represent the majority ethnic community in the country.

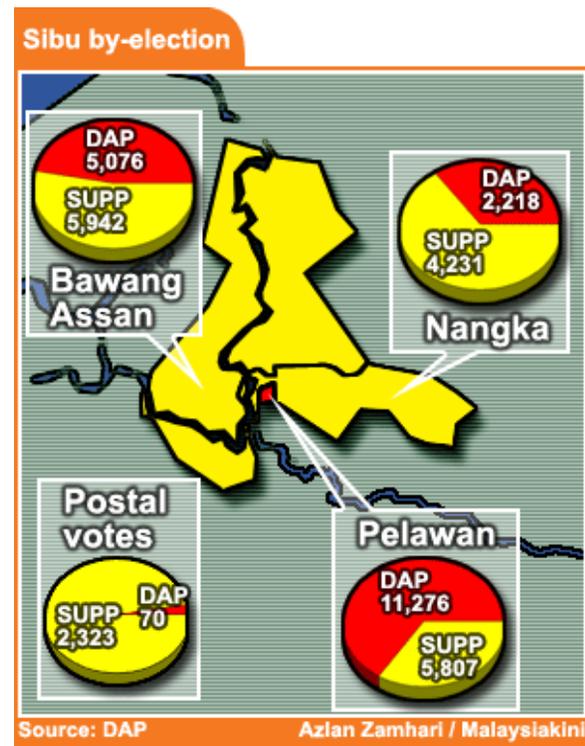


The field was not even as the Malay/Melanau communities have had much stronger support for the BN in Sibu traditionally than in West Malaysia. Personal patronage and relationships plays a much larger role in harnessing support in Sarawak as well.

Dissimilar political dynamics

Political dynamics in the Malay community in Sarawak are not the same as in West Malaysia. They are comprised of a more diverse group, including the politically powerful Melanau based in Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud's PBB.

Few appreciate that there are the differences and tensions between the Malay and Melanau communities, as each has their own individual ties to the federal and state governments.



While patronage is a prominent feature of the relationship to both during elections, how they identify and connect with state and federal actors differ.

What makes the issues even more complex is that many Sarawakian Malays/Melanau have different feelings about the importation of West Malaysian parties - namely Umno and PAS, both of which played major roles in contest for Malay votes this round.

The PBB was overshadowed by the penetration of a more prominent Umno-PAS campaign. Given the importance of the contest to Najib/Umno and Pakatan, this contest reflected a growing "national" transformation of the actors contesting for the Malay/Melanau ground.

When the results came in, the two majority Malay polling stations, the BN lost (yes, lost) support among Malays/Melanau on the margin of 3%. In real terms, they picked up a few votes in numbers, since these areas had a greater increase in the number of voters

over the last two years, but the BN lost their overall share.

What is most striking is the massive drop in Malay turnout, from over 68% in 2008, dropping to 50% this round. This was especially the case in Datu Nyabor, where turnout only hit a paltry 40%.

Rather than vote for BN, and Taib (*right*) in particular, they stayed home. Given the stakes at play, this was a substantive gain for Pakatan.

The presence of PAS, who camped out in the Malay/Melanau areas, was unprecedented, and suggests that the contestation for Malay votes will be more heated in the future, as networks form.

One has to ask what would have been the dynamic if there had not been the financial wherewithal of a by-election campaign.

The BN gains among Malays in West Malaysia did not extend to Sibiu. While the BN wins the overwhelming majority of Malay votes, 78%, the Sibiu Malay swing suggests that Pakatan has made inroads into what was seen as an impenetrable community.

Pakatan made inroads among the Iban

The gains for Pakatan in the Malay community were unexpected. The hope for the opposition was to make inroads among the Iban. Here the remoteness of the longhouses and link between the government and *rumah tuai* puts the BN with an advantage upfront.

The contest for the Iban speaks less to national power, but to state control in Sarawak. Throughout the campaign there were reports of intimidation in Iban areas, blockades against the entry of opposition leaders, and of course, intense vote-buying for each *pintu* and offers of development projects for the longhouses.

This community, comprising 17% of the vote in Sibiu, was seen as critical in the outcome of this contest and the state as a whole.



When the votes were counted, the BN won more, with a positive swing of 3.5% in the three majority Iban areas overall. Turnout was high in these areas as well, over 80%, which was surprising given the upcoming Gawai festival two weeks away which would have prevented many young voters from returning just to vote.

Yet a closer look at the polling station results show that the actual share of voter turnout cast for the BN and Pakatan remained on par with the 2008 polls, and there was interesting variation in the Iban vote.

The BN won most of its support in Penasu and lost support in Rassau and Bawang Assan in the range of 2-3%. Here too, this suggests that Pakatan made inroads, although only marginally and inconsistently. Yet, considering the amount of money thrown, this can only be seen as a Pakatan victory.

In real terms, Pakatan stemmed the tide of support for BN in these areas, as it will be difficult for the BN to repeat the financial incentives in the state and national election. This may, however, prove to be a wash as Pakatan also faces the challenge of maintaining its machinery and engagement in Iban areas.



Generational transformations

The ethnic transformation highlights some dark clouds for BN. Looking at the *saluran* results indicate a real storm. They did not pick up support among younger voters in the overall share. In fact, among the areas where there is a range of *saluran* (although not a large number), there was a drop of support among younger voters by 2 percent.

Turnout among younger voters also dropped. This was expected since many could not return home to vote.

The disenchantment extends across ethnic communities, although much less in the Malay and Iban areas than in the Chinese. It is important to note that in these areas, BN still commands the majority.

What was the most surprising from the results were the gains for the opposition among older voters, usually the diehards for SUPP.

While the oldest voters stayed more loyal to the BN camp, those under an estimated 55 years moved toward the opposition, especially among Chinese. This indicates a move toward Pakatan across generations in Sibü.

New urban-rural dynamics

The usual dichotomy in Sarawak points to strong urban support for DAP, with BN commanding the rural heartland. This round there are cracks here for BN as well. Pakatan gained an estimated 6% in rural areas overall, particularly among rural Chinese.

This rural swing was the product of better machinery and more engagement with these areas, but it is on par with the swing ethnically by the Chinese overall. This fact only further suggests real political changes in the Sarawak landscape.

It will be a challenge for Pakatan to maintain this momentum, but it shows that the rural ground is no longer as hard as it was in the past.

More broadly this suggests that the nature of Sarawak politics is shifting, as money is no longer as effective as it was in the past. It appears that as messages connect, exposure widens and engagement deepens, the BN loses support in Sarawak.

Assessing decreasing voter turnout

BN even lost support in who turned out to vote. On the surface, the voter turnout suggests a disengagement with the process. No question, both sides could do more to mobilise voters.

A close look, however, indicates that the composition of this drop was concentrated in one community, the Malays, and among younger voters, who did not return home.

Many Malays opted not to vote - some expected the win for BN, others pointed to neglect and yet others pointed to real reservations with BN in this contest, especially concerns over land, flooding and corruption. This indeed should be really worrying for BN.

Political upshot of voting trends

So what does all this mean politically? It is important to understand that this is a by-election and conditions are fluid. It is also important not to read too much into one contest.



This said, Pakatan has gone beyond expectations in gaining support. While Hulu Selangor still sting for Pakatan and suggests a real need to reevaluate the West Malaysia campaign, Sarawak has opened up.

The opposition has now a chance of breaking the BN iron hold on power in Sarawak, perhaps more than doubling their seats, and buttressing the defections with seats from East Malaysia, with more parliamentarians nationally.

It will be a major challenge for the opposition to replicate the machinery and cooperation in East Malaysia, but the terrain across the South China Sea has transformed since March, making the possibility of Putrajaya stronger than it has been since March 2008 and East Malaysia now more important politically than ever before.

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