

Barisan still holds the upper hand



First-time visitors to Sarawak, especially those from the peninsula, are pleasantly surprised by what they see. They cannot imagine how the road signs and notices, at even some government departments, have Chinese characters, besides Bahasa Malaysia and English.

On Sundays, the state radio even allows the churches to have a 1.5-minute broadcast, during which they convey their messages to their followers. Other faiths, too, are given their chance to do the same.

In coffeeshops, people of different races and religions sit together and have their coffee, with little sensitivity over the kind of food served at these eateries.

Near the Kuching riverside, there is a Chinese museum that pays tribute to the community.

In fact, the mayor of Kuching South is Chinese, the only one in the country.

At Bako, there is a Chinese temple near a Malay village but, interestingly, it is maintained with the help of Muslims there.

With 38 ethnic groups in the state, Sarawak's Cabinet, headed by Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, a Melanau, is also the most multi-racial.

For Sarawakians, of greater importance is their sense of togetherness in a state that has been regarded as a showcase of ethnic and religious tolerance.

The people can be forgiven if they sometimes feel uneasy with the preconceived and even condescending attitude of their brethren from the peninsula.

For Malaysians who have never set foot in Sarawak, its image is one of savages, rivers and jungles.

Taib, who heads the Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu, has led the state for 21 years, probably the longest term of any chief minister.

Not everyone has been happy with him. There have been allegations of business cronyism to neglect of hill people because of uneven economic development.

His detractors claim that Taib has been able to hold on to power because the opposition is in disarray.

It cannot be denied that there have been pockets of dissatisfaction, as in all democracies but, generally, Sarawakians are happy with what they have, especially their lifestyles.

The fact remains that Taib has been able

to deliver the votes to the Barisan Nasional. In the 1996 state polls, the Barisan won 58 seats while the DAP won four.

In the 1999 general election, the Barisan made a clean sweep, winning all 28 parliamentary seats it contested.

The country's biggest state will probably be even more important in the next general election, scheduled for 2004.

Sarawak will have its state elections this month and the bet is that the Barisan will perform even better than the last time.

The Barisan will again focus on the politics of development and its uniqueness, where racial and religious tolerance has been a hallmark. It will continue to emphasise on the relevance of moderation and power sharing.

The opposition, especially the DAP and the state-based State Reform Party, are harping on native customary rights, land issues and mismanagement.

Parti Keadilan Nasional is making its debut in the state polls but its leaders are mainly from the DAP and who are at loggerheads with their former party.

Both the parties have already said they eye the same urban constituencies. It will be interesting to see how national leaders from both sides will campaign in Sarawak.

PAS is almost non-existent in the state and its brand of politics is treated suspiciously in a state where people have a more liberal and tolerant attitude towards religion.

Still, the Islamist party has said it will contest.

It will not be easy for PAS to convince Sarawakians that their politics is suitable for them. The party failed miserably in Sabah and will probably face the same fate in Sarawak, too.

It will not be wrong to say that PAS may be successful in Kelantan and Terengganu but their fiery speeches will be a turn-off in Sarawak.

The rocket symbol is more familiar to the voters and if the opposition can make any dent, it is only the DAP which has several home-grown leaders but it will have to square off with Keadilan first.

But it's the votes of the predominantly rural constituencies that will make the difference, where land rights are emotional issues, particularly in the transformation of the way the natives live.

The challenge of the Barisan will be to explain that the value of land will not jump

unless there is a chance of development.

Estate development, which has been promoted for years to encourage rural farmers to participate in government land projects, will continue to be highlighted in the polls.

Unlike the peninsula, campaigning in the rural heartland is a logistics nightmare. Unless the candidates and their supporters have access to transport such as speed boats and helicopters, it will be pointless to even think of contesting.

In Telang Usan, for example, the mode of travel is river, timber track and air. It covers the upper Baram region to as far as the Bario highlands near the Sarawak-Indonesia border.

In areas near Limbang, it means campaigning in villages scattered along mangrove swamps that one uses to get to Brunei.

This time, the anti-logging issue seems to have disappeared but *Time* magazine and even CNN has given the issue a new lease of life by featuring self-proclaimed Swiss environmentalist Bruno Manser's exploits in the jungle.

He is, in fact, the cover story in the latest issue of the magazine, perhaps to time it with the state elections.

But the focus seems to be on the challenge that former Defence Minister Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha is throwing against the Barisan, presumably in all the constituencies.

It sounds like a personal fight with an old score to settle. He claims to represent Umno, but Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi have dismissed the claim.

It will not be easy for Abang Abu Bakar's contenders to say that they are not against the Barisan when they urge the voters to reject the Barisan at the same time.

And, in a rather unhealthy turn of events, racial politics has surfaced in this election with allegations that the Melanau have dominated the politics of Sarawak while the Malays have been sidelined.

Nevertheless, the bet is that a landslide victory for the Barisan is imminent. In fact, the Merdeka celebrations finale has been lined up in Sibul on Sept 16, a few days after polling.

Sept 16 is significant because Malaysia would not have been formed, 38 years ago, without the support of Sabah and Sarawak.