

25 SEP 2001

Sarawak-Culture

## CLASH OF POLITICAL CULTURE IN SARAWAK ELECTION

By: Azman Ujang

KUCHING, Sept 25 (Bernama) -- Sarawak is often spared the drama that creeps into the rough and tumble of Malaysian politics.

This accounts for the high degree of predictability in the outcome of elections for control of the state government, so predictable sometimes that it makes for a dull election.

But the run-up to Thursday's election has seen new trends emerging both in the style of campaigning by parties and their candidates and the substance of issues raised.

The standard fare in a state election here has been issues pertinent to Sarawak and its people but this time around, Peninsular Malaysia-based political parties participating in the election in a big way has "exported" national politics to the villages and the longhouses.

Boisterous campaign speeches of the opposition, especially by PAS and Parti Keadilan Nasional (Keadilan) on the surface pulled more crowd but like in Peninsular Malaysia, the general feeling is that it is so more because of their entertainment value.

While the opposition orators regaled the crowd, there were times when their lack of understanding of the local political culture, could prove to be a backlash.

When this reporter arrived at a 61-door Iban longhouse in the Sadong Jaya constituency, an hour's drive from here on Friday, he was told PAS campaigners had been barred from preaching their brand of politics among the Ibans in the area.

A retired civil servant, Sili anak Temenggong Bunsu bluntly told this reporter in Iban: "Enti nuan ari PAS kami endak benar nuan masuk " (If you are from PAS you cannot enter".

Saying that PAS was bringing in an "alien culture" to Sarawak, Sili spoke of an incident during nomination day in the constituency on Sept 18.

He claimed that supporters of PAS candidate Adam Ahid shouted at BN supporters and raised "sensitive" issues, adding that supporters of both sides almost ended up in a scuffle if not for the intervention of the police.

He said his longhouse had already turned away two groups of PAS campaigners from Kedah and Kelantan.

"They wore skull caps and behaved as if we were nobody. We know their type as several months ago they also came to our longhouses and met our people.

"One of them even had the cheek to wear a hand glove when he shook our hands...as if we are not clean," Sili said.

In the Malay areas, Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) campaigners were mild-mannered compared to Keadilan's, to the extent that influential local Malay leader Datuk Abang Johari Tun Openg raised alarm over their behaviour and that of their supporters.

Abang Johari, the BN candidate for Satok which covers the commercial area and several Malay kampungs here, said he got a cultural shock on nomination day when Keadilan supporters turned up wearing headbands just like the rioters on the streets of Jakarta.

"This is something that never happened before in Sarawak," he told Bernama.

If there is anything that saddens Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud about this election, it is what he calls the "gangster

politics" that is rearing its ugly heads.

Last night at an election rally here, he spoke of an incident during his campaign trail in the 1999 parliamentary election when he was pelted with stones by children.

"Little children, between six and seven years old, were taught to throw stones at the helicopter and me.

"This is the 'kurang ajar' (uncivilised) behaviour taught by a group of politicians who do not respect our culture," said Taib, who is bearing the brunt of the opposition hate campaign, including via huge billboards erected at strategic points here.

"In this state election, let's show that we don't want their style of politics and we will uphold our ways to ensure that development will continue in our state unhindered," added Taib, who travelled briskly by helicopter, making at least five to six stops daily in his campaign trail.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who spent a day campaigning for BN candidates yesterday, was equally sad that Keadilan and PAS were bringing "unhealthy culture" from Peninsular Malaysia in the polls campaign.

"I am sad that the two parties have brought their rough tactics to Sarawak.

"Previous elections in Sarawak were conducted in a calm and peaceful manner and not in a rough manner," said the prime minister, adding that supporters of both parties were also resorting to violence and slanderous words.

This alien culture or clash of political culture is spicing up the election with just two days before polling day.

-- BERNAMA

AU AO