

'BN=perintah' formula wins Sarawak rural seats

MalaysiaKini.com

May 21, 2013

By Keruah Usit

COMMENT 'Vote for Ubah, vote for hope' was the rallying call of DAP's urban candidates Chong Chien Jen and Julian Tan Kok Ping, at their closing ceramah in Kuching, Sarawak, on May 4, the eve of polling day.

More than 25,000 people responded with eager cheers. Urban voters were looking forward, in hope and confidence.

"Don't be afraid to vote for Pakatan (Rakyat)," was the message of the PKR's articulate candidate for Mambong, Willie Mongin, at his final ceramah at Siburan, 27km away.

He was addressing some 500 suburban and rural voters, mostly Bidayuh and Chinese. These voters were looking over their shoulders in fear.

azlanPakatan's message of hope won a ground-breaking majority of 51 percent of the nation's popular vote. It found resonance among urban Malays, Chinese, Indians and 'others' in Sabah and Sarawak.

Conversely, BN's negative campaign of fear, harping on racial and rural insecurities, captured 47 percent, largely in rural constituencies.

This was a reversal of the 2008 popular vote, when BN won 50 percent and Pakatan 48 percent. BN survived, thanks to its gerrymandering and control of government resources and mass media.

Will Pakatan progress in the next Sarawak assembly polls, due by 2016, and the 14th general election, in 2018? The answer lies, as in the rest of Malaysia, in rural seats.

BN won over rural communities primarily by threatening them with denial of basic amenities. It also used false arguments to deceive rural voters that civil servants who support Pakatan would be sacked, and that a Pakatan government would be controlled by the Chinese, the DAP, Christians, Jews, Americans, homosexuals, Tausugs, or all of the above.

In contrast, BN's favourite bugbear of another 'May 13' in the cities was largely ignored, with Pakatan winning urban votes convincingly from all ethnic groups.

BN's winning formula in Sarawakian rural seats is simple: 'BN=Perintah'.

'Perintah', as used by most Dayaks or local Malays, means 'government', encapsulating BN's position as absolute ruler in the rural hinterland.

Sarawak's ethnic groups, more than 40 in number, have not been subjects of a Malay sultan since Brunei ceded the territory to James Brooke in 1841.

The summit of the feudal pyramid of power has long been occupied by the White Rajahs, and since 1981, by Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud. Many rural voters have been psychologically cowed.

Pakatan's urban seats are secure

Pakatan's urban tsunami sweeps on in Sarawak. It made its breakthrough in the last two state elections, capturing seven seats out of 71 in 2006 and 15 in 2011.

This year, the DAP and PKR won an unprecedented six parliamentary seats out of 31 in Malaysia's largest state. This tripled the number of Pakatan MPs in Sarawak, with Chong's solitary victory in Kuching in 2008 being followed by another DAP success in the 2010 Sibu by-election.

azlanBN retained only one of the seven urban parliamentary seats, in Bintulu, through Tiong King Sing (left).

He owned most of Kuala Dimensi while it was milking the Port Klang Free Zone cash cow, and resigned as director only in 2010.

Despite his vast resources, he saw his 2008 majority halved from 14,965 to 7,433 votes.

BN has lost a generation of urban voters. Thanks to the online media, urban Sarawakians are incensed by reports of blatant corruption.

Urbanisation will accelerate, thanks to BN and corporate takeovers of native customary land. Young voters will swell the urban rolls, while rural populations are aging. These voters in the towns will be far more vocal, politically aware, and adept at social media than the older generations in rural seats.

Discontent caused by low wages - serving staff in an average coffeeshop make below RM500 each a month - and rising prices, means BN will face further

humiliation in urban contests in 2016 and 2018.

The economic cycle appears likely to take a downturn before 2018. BN only scraped through in GE13 despite reporting six percent economic growth, and will forfeit even more urban support if growth stagnates.

Sarawak's electoral turnout, while remaining the lowest in Malaysia, has surged from 65.1 percent in 2008, to 70 percent in 2011, and 76.5 percent in 2013. This trend will favour Pakatan over the incumbent BN, since enthusiastic voters are usually hungry for change, and a high turnout makes it harder to rig votes.

Pakatan must now be confident enough to focus their attention on rural and suburban seats.

BN clings on to rural Sarawak

In 2011, PKR won two rural seats: Ba'kelalan in the northeast, and Krian in the west. It is true that Pakatan failed to win a single rural parliamentary seat in 2013, but it lost Baram by a majority of only 1 percent, or 194 votes - fewer than the 242 spoiled votes.

Pakatan clearly lost the rural battle, even if fraud is taken into account in these deeply flawed and crassly unfair elections. But if Pakatan concentrates on rural seats, it will prosper in 2016 and 2018.

In 2013, BN took 59 percent of the popular vote in Sarawak, while Pakatan won 37 percent. Pakatan improved on its 2008 results, when BN took 59 percent of the vote, and Pakatan had only 29 percent.

This year's new spoiler, the 'BN-friendly' Sarawak Workers' Party funded by millionaire Sng Chee Hua, won only 1.9 percent of the popular vote. The party was crushed by daunting majorities in all its six contests, despite splurging on the election.

SWP has faded into insignificance, like Snap did in 2011. The 2016 and 2018 elections will be two-horse races.

BN performed better overall in 2013 than in the state elections in 2011, when its share was 55 percent, compared to Pakatan's 39 percent. But this comparison is partly unreliable.

In 2011, all of Pakatan's national leaders were in Sarawak, wooing voters, but not

in 2013. In GE13, with the state election safely out of the way, BN-friendly civil servants could train all their prodigious logistical artillery on the parliamentary contests.

NONE In recent years, the once-proud state civil service in Sarawak has ditched any pretence of impartiality, and now grovels before Taib (left).

His brother-in-law was even made state secretary from 2000-2006. Sarawak's recent procession of fawning state secretaries makes federal chief secretaries look, by comparison, like rebellious long-haired hippies.

In 2013, Pakatan contested all 31 parliamentary seats, compared with 26 seats in 2008. BN's solid support in the five previously uncontested seats meant that Pakatan gained only 10.9 percent support in Tanjong Manis and 12.6 percent in Igan (both through PAS), 18.7 percent in Selangau, 21.3 percent in Kapit, and 36.3 percent in Kanowit (all through PKR).

If Pakatan works hard to build its grassroots presence in these 'new' constituencies, this level of support will certainly rise.

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd
Source: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/230820>