

**SUPP at the crossroads**  
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COMMENT There's increasing suspicion in Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) circles that Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) leaders and activists may have started keeping some distance of late from beleaguered Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud.

This follows the failure of SUPP ministers to turn up at two major public functions with the same theme, 'SeNada SeJiwa - One Beat, One Spirit' that Taib hosted in Bintulu, and earlier in Sibul, recently.

bn supreme council mt meeting sapp sabah issue 190608 taib mahmudIt is not known what was Taib's response to what could be construed as a deliberate snub by a party which has not hesitated to walk his path 30 years earlier.

Other public and private functions hosted by Taib (right), smaller ones, have been poorly attended as well by SUPP representatives. Again, the youth and the more senior SUPP representatives were noticeably absent.

Taib's supporters in PBB, especially the Melanau Dayak, are outraged. They are openly asking themselves whether Taib will suffer the same fate as Abdul Rahman Ya'akub, his immediate predecessor and maternal uncle.

Rahman, who ran a controversial Muslim Melanau-led Islamic fundamentalist administration for ten years, was eased out by the federal government in early 1981.

This was after SUPP threatened to walk out from his administration and set up a new state government with the Sarawak National Party (Snap) and exclude the Bumiputera-based PBB.

They wanted Rahman's pro-Muslim economic policies, among others, dismantled. Then Prime Minister Hussein Onn prevailed upon Rahman to quit.

NONERahman wrested two concessions from Hussein before he quit i.e. the installation of his nephew as his successor and chief minister and his appointment as the governor.

Rahman (left) did not leave quietly. He ferried in busloads of Muslims, Melanau and Malay, from all over Sarawak and stage-managed several rallies to show that he had public support. But this did not cut any ice with Kuala Lumpur.

He had to go and eventually he did just that to continue sulking in isolation at Raja James Brooke's Istana by the Sarawak River in Petra Jaya, Kuching North. At SUPP's behest soon after, Taib cut short Rahman's stint as governor.

Taib also saw Snap, being a potential SUPP ally, as a threat when he became chief minister. He went to work with a vengeance to finance the breakaway Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS) from Snap in 1983.

Thus began the history of splintering and de-registering Dayak-based parties. Taib's strategy was to ensure that the Chinese would not henceforth throw their support behind Dayak political parties and exclude the Muslim Melanau-controlled PBB which has both

Dayak (Pesaka) and Muslim (Bumiputera) wings.

SUPP's game plan

The Chinese-led SUPP, where a third of the membership is Dayak, cannot this time around threaten to throw its weight behind a major Dayak-led party and leave PBB in the political wilderness.

So, it's by no means entirely certain what game plan that SUPP can work on this time to bring about changes in the state administration. The speculation is that the party must have thought out its options very carefully given the timing of its deliberate provoking of Taib.

George Chan Hong Nam SUPP president George Chan (right) - his daughter is married to Taib's son - may not be entirely in the picture as other party leaders move in unison to isolate, neutralise and marginalise him.

Among the young Turks in SUPP, increasingly better educated, the consensus is that the party must part company with BN, sooner rather than later, and strike out on its own.

The idea is that the party should go for as many seats as possible at the state elections. They don't want to be encumbered by BN's rigid seat allocations formula.

This circumscribes the democratic process and denies the grassroots majority a meaningful participation in the electoral process by tacitly endorsing elite power-sharing.

At present, SUPP gets just 19 of the 71 state seats while PBB gets the lion's share of 30 seats i.e. Melanau (both Muslim and Christian), Dayak and Malay.

SUPP lost eight of their seats to the Sarawak Democratic Action Party (DAP) at the last state outing in 2006. The party is expected to again lose these seats and probably suffer further losses - the figure mentioned is another three seats at the very minimum - at the next state elections which must come by the middle of next year.

The fact that SUPP is increasingly unhappy with Taib has been out in the open since May 16 when the party lost its Sibu parliamentary seat after 28 years in a by-election.

Sibu by election 070510 Wong Soon Koh Sibu SUPP chief and Second State Finance Minister Wong Soon Koh (left) even openly blamed Taib, an unprecedented action, for the party's defeat.

The chief minister did not mince his words at a BN retreat in Mulu on June 23 when he raised the issue to the discomfort of the SUPP leaders present. Other BN component parties, besides PBB, also saw SUPP as particularly ungrateful and expressed their feelings on the issue on the sidelines of the retreat.

Taib apparently was particularly bitter for being made the party's scapegoat after its leaders, more than those from any other party, did particularly well for themselves under his administration.

Much of this "SUPP making hay while the sun shone" was at the expense of the rural and Dayak majority whose political leaders are by and large in the poorhouse, Taib's deliberate choice for them.

SUPP cannot be entirely faulted for being more than sore with Taib. For one, the party feels, and more than rightly, that the continued splintering of Dayak parties and the dilution of their political strength has now turned out to be disadvantageous to their long-term future, sustainability and viability.

'No longer the kingmakers'

SUPP leaders no longer feel like the kingmakers that they once were before the birth of PBDS. Younger SUPP leaders are even openly telling the old guards that they have led the party over the years to irrelevance in the BN fold.

Party strategists acknowledge that SUPP can therefore no longer seek relevance within the BN and must therefore look elsewhere.

Hence, the increasing consensus is that the party should go for broke at the next state election.

The alternative is to die a slow and certain death within the BN as the Chinese vote bank deserts it in droves. This would leave it increasingly as a Dayak rather than a Chinese party.

Given a choice between George Chan and Lim Kit Siang, the DAP strongman, the Chinese in Sarawak would opt for the latter. They realise, as the Chinese in Sabah are increasingly voicing out these days, that the parochial politics of old - where deadly local Muslim sharks abound - is not only a dangerous environment for them but uncomfortably too small as their numbers in the nation keep steadily dipping with the years.

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