

**Jungle campaign nightmare for S'wak opposition**  
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Harrison Ngau's description of dirty politics in the rainforest state of Sarawak on Borneo island reads like a chapter in a spy novel, complete with subterfuge, threats, and contraband.

NONEThe amiable one-time lawmaker says the challenges he had to overcome to score an unlikely election victory will again face Malaysia's opposition when it contests statewide polls expected within months.

A political earthquake in 2008 national elections, which shook the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition's half-century grip on power, has rendered timber-rich Sarawak and neighbouring Sabah state extremely strategic.

With Borneo now one of its last bastions of support, the coalition must fend off the resurgent opposition led by Anwar Ibrahim and retain its hold there in the next national elections if it wants to stay in office.

The upcoming Sarawak state polls will be a keenly watched bellwether with far-reaching implications for the multicultural, Muslim-majority nation which Barisan Nasional has ruled since independence in 1957.

bn supreme council mt meeting sapp sabah issue 190608 taib mahmudBut Harrison Ngau is quite sure that going on past performance, the coalition - fronted in Sarawak by ageing chief minister Abdul Taib Mahmud, who has been in power for 29 years - will put up a tough fight.

"It was a nightmare and still remains a nightmare for the opposition to win in Sarawak polls," said Ngau, who served one term in parliament in the 1990s and is now a leading lawyer campaigning for native land rights.

When he decided to stand for office as an independent, no one gave him a chance of winning as his constituency was so huge, with voters scattered across jungles reachable only by boat, four-wheel-drive vehicles and plane.

"We had to campaign in Bario (highlands district) but we could not get a flight nor send our election pamphlets. The order from BN was: 'Ngau should not set foot in Bario. His posters should not be seen here'," he said.

Facing defeat, he came up with the idea of smuggling his election posters by hiding them inside empty biscuit tins, and air freighting them secretly to Bario, where they were quietly intercepted by friends.

NONE"The next morning my posters were hanging in Bario. It shocked my BN rival. To win elections in Sarawak one has to behave like a commando," said the 49-year-old in his offices in the coastal town of Miri.

Ngau says the state remains in thrall to powerful political masters and tycoons who control the timber and plantations industries that have plundered the state's natural resources.

The Pakatan Rakyat opposition alliance has set its sights on capturing Sarawak,

campaigning on land rights for indigenous people, poverty and allegations of rampant political corruption.

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak (above) made a historic visit to the Sarawak interior last month, delivering multi-million-dollar development pledges and a promise to survey native lands to pave the way for ownership of ancestral territory.

NONEBut decades of exploitation that have stripped the forests and poisoned the waterways, together with their unsuccessful quest for land rights, have left a strong sense of frustration and betrayal among Sarawak's tribes.

"The trust has been damaged. Look, our longhouses are falling apart," said Richard Jengan, a 50-year-old member of the Penan tribe in the remote village of Long Lamai.

"The soil is no longer fertile. It is impossible to hunt or look for food in the jungle," said 45-year-old neighbour Connie Lingga. "I think this time we should vote the opposition."

Baru Bian, the new leader of Anwar's Keadilan party in Sarawak, said the opposition alliance will contest all 71 seats in the state parliament -- currently it holds just seven.

"I am confident that with the mood on the ground we can topple Taib provided vote-buying and threats are not used," Baru Bian said, but admitted their slim resources may be no match for the coalition's vast election machinery.

The state polls will provide Najib with an opportunity to gauge voter sentiment as he prepares for national elections expected to be held in 2011.

malaysiakini discussion 050208 khoo kay pengIn 2008 the coalition was humbled with its worst results ever, losing control of five states and a third of parliamentary seats as ethnic Chinese and Indians swung to the opposition.

Currently, 54 of its 137 seats in parliament are Borneo electorates.

Political analyst Khoo Kay Peng (right) predicted the opposition would do well in urban seats, but said they faced a much more difficult job in the interior, where there is a long-established system of patronage and vote-buying.

"I do not see a change in the state government. It will be tough for the opposition to win because the state is huge and it will need a lot of resources to campaign."

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