

S'wak mainstream media all for chief minister
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The media war for Sarawakians' votes has heated up, with a state election expected within the next six months.

NONESalvoes fired by Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud (left), claiming 'unanimous' support by his ruling Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) for him to lead the state BN into the election, have saturated state media organs like Bernama and the Borneo Post.

Yet it is clearly inconceivable that any political party could ever have 'unanimous' support for any particular party leader. The proposition is laughable.

Even North Korean communist party members, despite vigorous brainwashing, cannot possibly worship Dear Leader Kim Jong Il unequivocally, without misgivings expressed in their hearts or in private.

Margaret Thatcher thought that her Conservative Party adored her, until the day her subordinates threw her out.

Mahathir Mohamad wept on stage when he announced he was stepping down, while his cabinet ministers thronged around him, pleading with him to reconsider - but in the end, life went on as usual for the other ambitious Umno hacks.

Party politics in Sarawak is as much a form of public theatre as it is in Umno, North Korea, or the blue-rinsed bastions of conservatism in England. The PBB is heaving with internal intrigue, fomented by Taib himself, to limit the support base of each of his deputies.

He has continually played off one supporter against another, to minimise the risk of a direct challenge to his position and to the planned ascendancy of his son Sulaiman, the clown prince.

Whatever complaints political commentators may have about Taib's 29 year rule, there is no doubt he is a crafty veteran. He has used his public musings about withdrawing from the elections to draw out his potential rivals in PBB and has strengthened his hand in dealing with federal BN and the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP).

NONEAfter losing the Sibu by-election, the SUPP has made its desperation public, by appealing to premier Najib Abdul Razak (right) to ease Taib's grip on the political economy.

But by proving he has Sarawak BN's 'unanimous' support, Taib has undermined any concessions the SUPP might be hoping to wring out of Najib.

Taib may also hope that his possible departure would persuade a few gullible Sarawakian Chinese to vote for the incumbent BN, out of fear that Umno would move into Sarawak if the state BN is weakened.

Other voices silenced

As is usual in the presence of grand narratives, the voices of the common people have been somewhat muted.

Still, the communal Sarawakian blog Hornbill Unleashed published a hilarious eyewitness report of a media event on August 29, organised by PBB supporters in Samarahan, Taib's previous parliamentary constituency. The report was entitled 'Who is interested in the Taib sandiwara?'

The Kota Samarahan parliamentary constituency comprises two state seats, one held by Taib's brother Ali Mahmud and the other by his chief political secretary, Abdul Karim Hamzah. Even so, the organisers fell somewhat short of their target of 2000 people signing a petition urging Taib to stay on as state leader.

According to an eye-witness, when the signing event was due to commence, there were fewer than 200 people in the community hall. The organisers played music to placate the few people milling about, and sent out buses to ferry in more supporters. But two hours later they had only scabbled together 600 people, some of whom were under-aged and ineligible to vote.

The mainstream media, led by Borneo Post cheerleaders, claimed that "more than 1,000" Samarahan residents had delivered a memorandum of support for Taib to Abdul Rahim Hamzah in a 'brief' ceremony. The article in Malay was headlined 'The people still love Taib', with no discernible trace of irony.

Real issues ignored

While the mainstream media makes a great fanfare of begging Taib to stay, it has studiously ignored real issues.

For example, recent important revelations of massive property and corporate wealth amassed by Taib's family in Canada, the United States and Britain featured only in the alternative media.

The website Sarawak Report traced a paper trail to demonstrate that Taib had set up a RM250 million property conglomerate in the United States in 1987, now worth far more at today's prices.

Taib has not resorted to litigation, perhaps worried that the publicity would be even more damaging ahead of the elections.

There has been no mention in the mainstream media of the generosity of Samling, a Sarawakian logging company, in handing over two palatial homes worth RM30 million in the United States to Taib's family.

ulu baram samling sarawak blockade 190608 01And a symbolic blockade in defence of native customary rights (NCR) land on Sept 2 by Penan villagers against Samling and other companies in Baram never made the local newspapers either.

According to Sahabat Alam Malaysia and the Sarawak Penan Association (SPA), 150 villagers from Long Nen, Long Kevok, Long Bangan, Long Belok, Long Sayan and Ba' Marong gathered at the site of a logging road blockade torn down by the police a year ago.

"The blockades last year were erected firstly, to demand that the Sarawak State Government must recognise that we have the right to make our own decisions in relation to our NCR land, and secondly, to ask that logging activities and the encroachments into our NCR land to be immediately halted in order to prevent starvation incidences.

"In essence, it was a protest to demand that both the government and logging companies to recognise our rights on our land," said Panai Ayat, SPA Secretary, in a gathering to mark the first anniversary of the Apoh-Tutoh blockade as well as three decades of protests against loggers' intrusions.

False promises

Panai denounced state assembly representative Lihan Jok for appearing at last year's blockade, and for making false promises that the assemblyperson would arrange for community representatives to meet senior state leaders to discuss the NCR land issue.

Lihan Jok had also pledged to improve clinics, kindergartens, agriculture and housing for the Penan living in poverty, while he was trying to persuade the Penan to dismantle their barricade.

Lihan Jok had been under duress from his political superiors and logging companies, since last year's protest had held up timber extraction for a month.

kuala muda post tsunami 170605 longhouse"Now a year later, we have yet to hear how even these very simple demands will be fulfilled by the state. Where are the materials and help for us to have better longhouses? Where are the kindergartens and clinics? Where are the meetings promised? Where are the agricultural assistance and resources to help us help ourselves in producing more and better foods for our families?" Panai asked.

Panai also condemned top-down government plans to resettle local communities without consulting them, in contravention of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Undrip), an agreement Malaysia signed in 2007.

"Promises have to be kept. Our people have to be informed. We are citizens with rights," he concluded.

Yet his words, and other rural peoples' voices, have been drowned out by unending calls in the sycophantic media for the chief minister to lead BN into the next election.

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