



In Bakun,
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The Belaga state seat which houses the controversial Bakun dam, is seen as one of the few Orang Ulu constituencies the opposition has a chance of winning in the next Sarawak state election, which needs to be held before July next year.

However, lack of information caused by remote geographical factors might prove to be a stumbling block for local voters to make informed decisions on their future.

The constituency is as large as Pahang state, but has only a population of around 20,000 and 7,000 registered voters. About half are concentrated in the Sungai Asap resettlement area.

It lacks basic infrastructure like tarred roads, phone services and television signals, which impedes the flow of information on the latest developments in the state and nation. There are no newspapers and no free-to-air television.

The only media that is accessible in this area is the Astro satellite television service, which the majority can't afford.

So, many rather install *Parabola* - a satellite dish that allows them to watch Indonesian television programmes without charge - as their main source of entertainment.

Many of them are not exposed to developments outside their area. This favours the ruling parties because they have the government machinery to gain access the people living here.

Naha Jalei, which is located in the remote upstream area of Sungai Balui, is one of such examples.

The longhouse, which is only accessible by boat through Sungai Balui, is a six-hour journey from the Bakun dam and it can cost about RM3,000, depending on the size of the boat and the experience of boatman.

Although the Kayans here are fighting with the government in the court on Bakun's compensation issue, the ruling BN still enjoy a majority support here as shown in the last state election.

If not for the visit of native activist Micheal Jok (*left*) last month, the locals would never know the meaning of their votes in both general and state elections and how they can influence the running of the government.

The former priest followed a documentary video team to Naha Jalei and held a talk one night, which was attended by around 30 villagers.

He explained how the local BN assemblymen had voted to pass laws unfavourable to native



communities that were tabled by the state government, especially regarding native customary rights (NCR) land.

"This root of the problem is actually us - we believed BN's promises and voted for them," he said.

Reliance on the government service

When interviewed later, Micheal explained that the naiveness is due to villagers' reliance on government assistance especially when they are living in remote areas.

"Although they might not be happy, they rely on the government to provide basic facilities like health and education services, so they have to vote for the ruling party. If not, they might think it would be the end of them," he said.

He called this reliance "development politics", which transforms the villagers into "babies" who have to rely on the "parents" to feed them.

"In the past, there were many independent candidates, but they only appeared during election times and never worked together as an opposition force, so they don't offer much choice also."

He said what the local activists can do is explain the truth to the people.

"We try to impress on them that the politicians are trying to confuse us, saying that there will be no schools or clinics if we don't vote for them. But I hope we can educate them to make wiser choices," he stressed.

Mobile phone as messengers

Micheal suggested the opposition members should consider using mobile phones to pass on their messages of change rather than visiting these remote areas.



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aysia activist which has flown after registration, also pointed the remote area, it is very hard things in a broader perspective.

some influence on the election

The residents in a longhouse are usually a big family and lead by a headman, which makes him vital in deciding the voting trend.

According to Harry Wing Miku, a Kayan member who is now working in Bintulu, the government will normally appoint a headman who is pro-government to bolster their support.



Change in next election?

However, this might be less effective as some Bakun resettlers or even headmen are preparing to give the opposition a chance, after realising that government promises have been broken.



This is evident in last state election as BN lost badly in a few longhouses in Sungai Asap, especially those visited by the opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim during 2006 state election.

Anwar is also familiar to them as the former deputy prime minister has visited them to hear their opinions and complaints on the Bakun dam projects when he was part of the government in 1995.

This has reduced BN majority in Belaga to 277 votes from 1,000. They would also have lost if the independent and opposition candidates did not split their votes.

The BN candidate Liwan Lagang from PRS won 1,855 votes in total, while the independent Stanley Ajang Batok (who is former local BN assemblyman) and John Bampa from SNAP got 1,628 and 912 votes

respectively.

It is understood that Belaga might contest under PKR in next state election, while BN will retain Liwan as its candidate.

Yout Ampong from Long Lawen (*right*), said he would consider voting for opposition this time.

"BN only comes here every five years during election and never appear after that. They do not solve our problems," said the farmer.

A 90-year-old Naha Jalei villager, Havit Batu, also hope that outsiders can deliver more political messages to them, so that they can make a correct decision this time.

"We do not understand outside politics. If you have any information, I hope you can explain to us."

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