

Thugs raise stakes in Sarawak land conflicts
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COMMENT Rural Sarawakians may lack adequate access to information on Abdul Taib Mahmud's means of amassing an immense fortune, reported to be worth several billion US dollars.

NONEBut many have certainly felt the direct impact of land acquisition favouring plantation and logging companies closely linked with Taib's family.

Reports of force used by police and company employees (including members of organised gangs) against villagers defending their land against intruders have been increasing.

The Bruno Manser Fund (BMF), an indigenous rights advocate, announced on Dec 10 that armed loggers have attempted to intimidate local farmers in Kampung Gran, near Sri Aman, while villagers' police reports against the loggers have been ignored.

The BMF said while the villagers were defending their fruit and rubber trees from destruction by a bulldozer belonging to a logging company called Sentiasa Maju, a logger had waved a gun at them and threatened that the company was able to bring in "many gangsters".

The BMF also pointed out that the shareholders of Sentiasa Maju had never been made public, contrary to the established practice of the Companies Commission of Malaysia, although the company had been founded in 1980. This secrecy has given rise to the inevitable speculation that the company is owned by the political elite.

NONESahabat Alam Malaysia, an environmental pressure group, wrote to Malaysiakini on Dec 6 to condemn a decision to charge an Iban farmer, Liam Rengga, with "attempted murder" near Bintulu, after oil palm workers filed a police report against him.

Liam Rengga denied any attempted violence against the workers, although he said he had noticed a shotgun in the workers' truck, the day before his arrest.

These violent tactics used by logging and plantation companies, backed up by police armed with live ammunition, tear gas and riot squads, are part of a pattern of intimidation of rural communities in conflicts over Native Customary Rights to land over the past three decades.

Indigenous rights groups have long demanded an even-handed approach by the police, during these protests by local villagers, but to no avail.

'Some BN candidates might lose their seats'

The relentless drip of leaked information about chief minister Taib's financial affairs has become common knowledge among urban Sarawakians, and has now reached a growing number of the suburban and rural population.

The damaging leaks have exposed an intimate portrait of Taib's fortune, including photographs of palatial family homes in developed countries. Many details can only have emerged because of discontent on the part of well-connected members of Taib's coterie.

Taib's chief political secretary Abdul Karim made a widely disparaged remark in a Radio Free Sarawak interview last week, that it is "very unfair" that Taib should not be allowed to hoard wealth.

Abdul Karim's assertion dovetails with Taib's own protest that his political opponents are encouraging "envy of the rich".

But landowners are beginning to make the connection themselves between the loss of their land, the real and threatened violence by police and company thugs and the undeniably vast wealth of Sarawak's political elite.

Sarawak's de facto information minister, Adenan Satem, conceded on Dec 10 that the mindset of Sarawakians has "changed tremendously" and they now have easy access to information. His comments were reported in the state government mouthpiece, the Borneo Post newspaper.

NONEAccording to the Borneo Post, Adenan Satem pointed out that Sarawakians are "not as appreciative as before when given government assistance" because they now believe that it is the government's job to look after them.

He warned that some BN candidates might be defeated in the coming elections, thanks to local infighting within, and among, BN's own component parties.

Most political observers agree that victory by the BN in the upcoming elections is a near certainty, given that the BN enjoys the overwhelming advantages of incumbency in the vast, poverty-stricken state.

NONEHowever, the BN's two-thirds majority may be at risk. This in turn would jeopardise BN's ability to pass land code amendments with impunity. The freedom to grant timber and plantation licences, and parcel out land to cronies, is the bedrock of the state's network of political patronage.

The extent to which news of Taib's riches, and the violent methods used in land conflicts by loggers and oil palm plantation owners, and the police, has percolated through to the rural population, remains unclear.

The influence of this news on the outcome of the election is also unpredictable, given other factors such as "brand recognition" of BN, the only party in government since independence, loyalty to ketua kampung and other community leaders appointed by BN, vote-buying and more promises of development.

However, unless the authorities can rein in these violent tactics on the part of companies and the police, more villagers may be killed or seriously injured as they have been in the past - the worst possible scenario for BN strategists for the state election due in the next few months.