

**Sarawak remains Taib's country, even if Anwar rises**  
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**Joe Fernandez**

Analysis  
MCPX

Fallen angel Anwar Ibrahim - the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) advisor - has set 'the uncanny calm of Sarawak before the storm' in his sights after Permatang Pauh. He made this clear even in the midst of hectic campaigning in Permatang Pauh, citing that Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud has overstayed his welcome.

taib mahmudThe fact that this call didn't come from people that matter in Sarawak is a big political mistake and Taib's inner circle led by his predecessor and uncle Abdul Rahman Yakub, if not the man himself, must be laughing their heads off. However for how long is anybody's guess.

Rahman was once fond of privately telling opponents especially Malay and Dayak rebels, to deter and lure them into his clutches, that his family has enough wealth that would equal and exceed the Gandhi dynasty in India in their grip of Sarawakian politics.

Besides, the Taib family has any number of political lobbyists in Kuala Lumpur to not only 'keep an eye' on the federal government but 'keep them in check'. This is like the proverbial tail wagging the dog.

Taib is not the only person to cling tightly to public office, but he shows crucial differences.

He became chief minister in 1981 at about the same time as Mahathir became prime minister and had him "demoted" to the post of federal territory minister in the federal cabinet. Mahathir left after 22 years even if his detractors believed he would die in office. He continues to snipe at his successors.

sarawak energy board slide show hydropower project in sarawak 180608 bakun damTaib is still around, fending off one announced "successor" after another, denying two generations from taking office and possibly a third. "There is always unfinished business," note political analysts in Kuching who snipe at Taib in their small blogs.

Anwar ratcheted up the stakes by pledging that all government and government-initiated development projects in the state would be either reviewed, scrapped or audited once he wrests the reins of power in Putrajaya come Sept 16, Malaysia Day, no less a revolution of sorts in slow motion towards much needed reformation. This evolution in thinking does away with questions over the morality, or otherwise, of political defections across party and government lines.

### **Politics of development**

The projects have long been under consideration, says Anwar, considering the virtual monopoly held by "cronies" and families with strong connections to a handful of the top BN politicians in the state. He left open the possibility that certain projects may in fact be scams under the guise of the politics of development, Taib's favourite phrase.

This is like a double whammy. While identifying the Achilles heel in Sarawak's body politic, he delivered a first blow to the solar plexus in the best James Bond style, the 007 License to Kill hero in Ian Fleming's novels. So far, no one in Sarawak is taking the bait.

anwar ibrahim penang kg kota permatang pauh by election campaign 140808 12Anwar is not after Taib's head for no reason although there are suspicions that he wants to force the latter to ditch his traditional support prematurely for whoever is in Kuala Lumpur and make peace with him on reasonable terms.

Taib is an eternal survivor in politics and can be expected to do this in his own time. The others around him are waiting dutifully like robots for a cue from him. He has all of them picking from his hand. If Taib tells them to go or follow him, they will.

The infamous Sarawak parochialism is also at work here as they juggle to "keep the devils in Kuala Lumpur" at bay from their beloved state of reluctant participants in the federation. Never has a state been so completely insulated from the rest of the nation.

Meanwhile, this is like a chicken-and-egg situation. Does Anwar get Taib's support first and then become prime minister or does he become prime minister first and then get Taib's support? The latter course might be fraught with all sorts of uncertain risks for Taib especially as he faces state elections as early as next year.

To be sure there are serious issues in the Sarawak of the once feared and famous Dayak tribes, camouflaged by the close links between the powers-that-be and the mainstream media, the virtual absence of the alternative media and low literacy rates, especially among the legendary head-hunting Iban who form the biggest grouping in the state.

The Iban have this childlike notion planted in their heads that "the government is our father and mother who takes care of us" and voting for the opposition, an unthinkable idea, is like going against our father and mother.

Although the Dayaks, the Iban included, form the majority community in the state, they remain at the bottom of the heap, reduced to being drawers of water and hewers of wood for others, lacking any direction as a community. Surely, these are the original "lost tribes" rooted in inertia.

## **Melanau duality**

ncr sarawak land dispute blockade in simunjan 020708 01The first two chief ministers since independence were Ibans - Stephen Kalong Ningkan and Penghulu Tawi Sli.

Both Rahman and Taib come from the small Melanau community in Mukah who number less a little over 100,000 - Muslims, Christians and Pagans included.

The Melanau, especially the Muslims, are often accused of having a foot in both the Malay and Dayak communities in much the same way as the Indian Muslims.

The other Dayak communities are the Bidayuh in the Kuching and Serian divisions and the Orang Ulu - Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit - followed by the Lun Bawang, Penan, Punan and Kedayan in the Miri and nearby divisions.

Taib's stranglehold on power is hardly the result of the voters backing him but more by

default since the opposition in the state has never been united and organised as they are elsewhere in Malaysia. In the absence of the alternative media, the Dayaks can even be persuaded by the powers-that-be to remain ever loyal against their own interests.

If anyone emerges to organise and lead the opposition for a democratisation process, "the father and mother theory" of politics and government of the Ibans and other Dayaks notwithstanding, Taib and his family will soon be history and be expected to go into exile in their second home in Canada.

Otherwise, driving the highly superstitious Taib - he who has numerous mystical rings on the fingers and a dozen specially-blessed hats - from the seat of power will remain a pipe-dream.

If the Grim Reaper comes for him in the meantime, that will be a different matter.

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There may be some hope here since Taib these days seem to be in a constant daze although he keeps up appearances and puts on a brave front.

It is not clear that he is fully conscious and aware all the time. Will he have the strength and stamina for a tough, protracted political campaign in the next round?

The talk along the grapevine is that he's not really as well as his supporters would like him to be and this follows a recent bout with colon cancer which appears to be in remission. But the stresses and strains of office and age could re-start his health problems all over again with a vengeance.

Will we ever see the last of Taib - it's getting to be more than boring - in the near future? Are there the prospects of change - to borrow a phrase from American presidential hopeful Obama - that we can all believe in?

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