

Winds of political change blow through Sarawak jungles
Malaysianmirror.com
11 August 2010

LONG MUBUI, Sarawak – An opposition party poster hanging in a Penan tribal chieftain's wooden longhouse deep in Malaysia's rainforests signals winds of political change blowing across Borneo island.

The Penan are among the most disadvantaged of Malaysia's indigenous people, and have for decades fought a one-sided war against the powerful logging and plantation firms that are obliterating their ancestral land.

But a political transformation in Malaysia, which threatens to unseat the coalition that has ruled for half a century, has put the Borneo island states of Sabah and Sarawak in a powerful position.

And the poster in the Penan longhouse, promoting the leaders of the Democratic Action Party – one of a trio that make up the opposition Pakatan Rakyat alliance – is the sort of thing that has the government worried.

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak made an historic visit last month to the interior of Sarawak to visit the Penan and other "Orang Ulu" – tribal groups known as "River People" as their homelands are located along remote waterways.

The premier, who arrived with senior ministers by helicopter in the village of Long Banga, made multi-million-dollar pledges to fund projects including a long-overdue road, a mini dam and a mobile medical clinic.

He also announced a plan to survey native lands, a move he said would give indigenous people ownership of their ancestral territory – the holy grail they have been campaigning for in vain.

"The response is great. It was very spontaneous. The promises will be delivered," an ebullient Najib said before flying out of the jungle.

Women and Community minister Shahrizat Abdul Jalil also flew into Sarawak last month, to take charge of an investigation into allegations of rampant sexual abuse and rape of Penan women at the hands of logging workers.

"The Penan community should know that now they have someone to champion their cause and that is us," she said.

But despite the flurry of high-level attention, and promises of action on issues critical to the future of the Penan, there is widespread scepticism over the intentions of the Barisan National (BN) government.

After 2008 elections that transformed Malaysia's political scene by handing the opposition alliance a third of parliamentary seats, the BN must retain Sabah and Sarawak in the next elections if it wants to stay in power.

A long journey by boat and car into Sarawak's rugged interior found that, far from being hopeful that the new focus on Borneo will finally aid their cause, there is a strong sense of frustration and betrayal among the Penan.

Many feel cheated by promises made and broken in the past half-century since independence, and are feeling emboldened to vote against the government for the first time in elections that could come later this year.

"I will advise my villagers to vote for the opposition," Abeng Jek, a 67-year-old former village headman told AFP as other Penan nodded their heads in agreement.

"All this while I have voted Barisan Nasional. We will no longer accept promises. We want change," he said as children peeped out of their longhouse rooms to hear the elder's frustration.

"Twenty years ago I asked for a rice machine, new zinc for the roof and concrete pavement in front of the longhouse. They said: yes, yes. I voted the ruling party. Now my stomach is empty," he said.

There are at least 10,000 Penan in Sarawak, but their way of life is under threat from extensive logging of their traditional hunting grounds, as well as the spread of palm oil and timber plantations.

The tribespeople, armed with spears and blowpipes, continue to set up blockades to stop powerful companies from wiping out the remnants of their ancestral land, but often meet with a violent response. - AFP

The plight of the Penan people was made famous in the 1990s by environmental activist Bruno Manser, who campaigned to protect their way of life and fend off the loggers, before he vanished in 2000 amid suspicion of foul play.

Lukas Straumann, director of the Bruno Manser Fund which campaigns for the people of the rainforests, is pessimistic that the new focus on the region will benefit the Penan or other indigenous tribes.

He said that Najib was not able to deliver the critical promise of land reform, which lies in the hands of long-serving Sarawak chief minister Abdul Taib Mahmud.

"The problem is, the prime minister is not in charge. Taib is in charge," he said. "So we do not believe they will give over the land unless there is a change in government or unless they are forced to do so by the courts."

Further along the Baram river in the village of Long Lamai, some Penan complained that while Najib came with new promises of dams and roads, earlier pledges for drains and home repairs had not yet been fulfilled.

"The trust has been damaged. Look, our longhouses are falling apart. They promised a drain but it has not been built," said 50-year-old Richard Jengan. "Now I will vote anyone who can help us."

Bulan Teko, 40, said she and many others were disappointed that no action has been taken against the perpetrators of the rape epidemic, including loggers who preyed on girls forced to seek lifts to reach far-flung schools.

"Now the women and children are afraid to venture out alone," she said, adding that it had added to long-standing hardships caused by deforestation.

"Logging has polluted our rivers, the only source of clean water and we continue to live in darkness at night," she said.

"Our children read with oil lamps. And when we have no money to buy fuel, we live in darkness."

Daud Sedin, a 35-year-old Penan who walked five hours through the jungle from neighbouring Data Bila village to meet Najib at Long Banga said he desperately hoped the prime minister would resolve the land issue.

"Logging companies encroach our land – cutting down our trees and running over our dogs. We are frustrated. We feel cheated by the government's hollow words," he said.

"All the Orang Ulu, especially the young, are talking about voting for the opposition."

James Chin, political science professor at the Monash University campus in Kuala Lumpur, rubbished the prime minister's initiative as a "pre-election ploy to win native votes."

But he is not convinced that their grievances will overcome the vote-buying that is a staple part of elections in Sarawak, perpetuating the dominance of powerful, cashed-up ruling parties.

"Come polls, the natives will be swayed to vote the ruling party via vote buying. Remember they are poor, money will cool their frustrations," said Chin. - AFP

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