

The cesspool of Sarawak politics
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ONCE Again Sarawak's name is on everybody's lips as the state is poised to confront her 11th parliamentary and 10th state elections. But unlike previous occasions, the outcome of this state contest in the Land of the Hornbill will have far-reaching consequences for the political development of the whole nation.

After Barisan Nasional came close to a shock defeat in the last general election, the balance of power in Kuala Lumpur now lies squarely in the hands of the polity in East Malaysia. The 2008 electoral swing away from Barisan Nasional at the federal level has automatically signalled the possibility of a transition of power in Malaysian politics to Sarawak, that vast eastern state.

The immediate question raised in the minds of voters throughout the country is whether such a shift of power will take place within the next eight months, during which the political situation in Sarawak will be keenly watched.

Sarawak is like a foreign country to the rest of Malaysia. The balance of power in the state is hugely different from the rest of the country, thanks to her unique ethnic composition. I know there are tremendous changes in the political balance in peninsular Malaysia, but one would be making a flawed assumption if one thinks that Sarawak politics is a mere extension of the political situation in peninsular Malaysia.

Sarawak has enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy within the federation of Malaysia. What happens in Sarawak in the next eight months may not be repeated in peninsular Malaysia. The ethnic mix of Sarawak is completely different from the rest of the country, and so is the state's historical and political background behind the development of democracy. We have to examine the politics of Sarawak through new lenses.

Part of the tension in Sarawak's sociological make-up comes from the fact that the majority race is not Malay, but the ruling elite comes from the 20 percent proportion of Malays and also 5 percent Melanau natives (most Melanau are Muslim, but some are Christian or animist).

Thus the first bone of contention is the fact that the Malays and the Melanau are the minority. This is an anomaly in the logic of racial politics that still plays a dominant role in the state.

By the logic of the national racial politics, it would be Sarawak's Dayak majority who should enjoy political dominance. But by a series of skilful Machiavellian manoeuvres, the most dominant political office of the chief minister has belonged to a Melanau Muslim for four decades, that runs counter to the rules of racial politics.

Exactly when this internal contradiction will burst open and force a reshuffle of our nation's political cards will only be known in the years to come.

In Sarawak and Sabah, the Malay power base lies outside these states, in peninsular Malaysia. The imperative of the national narrative is the political assumption that the Malaysia must be dominated by political leaders from among the Malays, throughout the

entire country.

This narrative has condemned politics in Sarawak to be incurably ethnic in nature, pre-determining that the history of Merdeka in Malaysia can only be a Malay story, even in a state where the Malays form the minority.

After Merdeka, the concession given by national politics to the hegemony of the Umno-dominated politics of race has been that of allocating exclusive political power to the Malays as a race, against all dictates of the logic of racial politics in Sarawak.

Until today, Malay dominance in Sarawak is symbolised by the premier position of Bahasa Malaysia as a national language, underlying the nation-building scheme of Malaysia, trying to create a Malay nation in a Dayak-majority Sarawak.

The state of Sarawak has also conceded cultural control in language policies to the pre-eminent position of Bahasa Malaysia. In return, within this delicate balance of power between the state and the federation, Sarawak has been allowed to run its own affairs under the freedoms granted by the 18-point independence agreement, signed between Malaya and the states of Borneo during the formation of Malaysia.

Within the framework of the Malaysia Agreement, Sarawak enjoys certain elements of autonomy. The Agreement also provides a background for the construction of a Malay nation state within the ambit of the Malaysian Federation. The understanding was that Sarawak was to become the model of a Malay state, even though in reality the politics of Malaysia is always going to remain irreversibly multiracial.

The dominance of the Malay race in the peninsula provided the necessary platform that led to the supremacy of the Melanau Muslim elite in Sarawak, engineered and realised by Malay political leaders from the peninsula. This was consolidated over the years by the concentration of power in the Malay party Umno.

Therein lies a stark contradiction in the balance of power in federal politics, that screams out to be addressed. Here we have the first potential flashpoint in Sarawak's politics: for the non-Malays in the Borneo state to stake a legitimate claim for political dominance (if under the jaded doctrine of racial politics). - Hornbill Unleashed

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