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# BREWING ELECTORAL BATTLE IN SARAWAK

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The GPS-led state government is planning a massive roll-out of major development projects to gain support



Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and other Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia leaders during the launch of the party's Sarawak chapter in Bintulu on Dec 1. FILE PIC

**A**NY hopes that Sarawak – ruled by Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), essentially the state Barisan Nasional coalition “re-christened” after the May 9 general election – would eventually settle into some sort of political rapprochement with the Pakatan Harapan (PH)-led Federal administration were as good as dashed on Dec 1.

Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad personally travelled to Bintulu on that day to officially launch the Sarawak chapter of Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu), the party he chairs.

With the launch, the very obvious political missing link in Sarawak for PH was closed. PH component parties PKR and DAP are well-established in the state and together send a dozen Sarawak representatives to Parliament, compared to 19 from GPS.

The inroads by PH in the last general election into what used to be an almost politically impregnable Sarawak – particularly in Bumiputra-majority constituencies of rural Sarawak – will have whetted appetites about the perceived vulnerabilities of GPS in the run-up to the next state election due in about two years.

Given that PKR and DAP have both made political gains at the expense of GPS' lesser coalition partners such as Sarawak United People's Party and Parti Rakyat Sarawak, BERSATU thus seems to be aiming squarely at the strongholds currently held by Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu

(PBB), GPS' indispensable backbone party.

Neither Bersatu nor Dr Mahathir has so far let on much about its strategy for taking on GPS politically. Of course GPS, and in particular Chief Minister Datuk Patinggi Abang Johari Abang Openg are not taking things sitting down. In anticipation of precisely such an onslaught from PH, the state government is planning a massive and unprecedented roll-out in the new year of a dizzying array of major development projects.

Much will also be made by GPS of the fact that it unites all Sarawak-based political parties, against PH whose parties are all peninsula-based. At a time of heightened sensitivity among many in Sarawak towards state rights, GPS must hope this strikes a popular resonance.

But such a state political strategy is not fool-proof and may yet even backfire. A promise of a massive infusion of public funds in so short a period of time may bring in its wake a host of problems to do with issues of transparency and fair disbursement which may only be a godsend in terms of ammunition for PH parties against GPS, to say nothing of the state's bureaucratic capac-

ity to handle a very sudden fund influx.

Moreover, in order to counter this, Putrajaya is also likely to turn on its spigot to lavish the state with its own largesse, especially as the upcoming Sarawak polls will be viewed as some sort of mid-term test of the popularity of the national government.

Even an electoral battle fought over restoring any perceived lost state rights may be problematic for GPS if PH starts to seriously question if it was not previous state leaders themselves who voluntarily signed away those rights.

All told, the very splintered nature of Sarawak's Bumiputra vote – on which any election will be won or lost – may prove to be the Achilles' heel for either GPS or PH.

Both camps must be watching, rather hopefully or nervously, which way the wind is blowing for the crucial Dayak vote. Dayak political restiveness is never far below the surface and has largely been contained or ameliorated in recent decades either by clever political design or the self-defeating machinations of Dayak political leaders.

If Bersatu's entry into the state succeeds in splintering even the

non-Dayak Bumiputra vote, the state's political playing field may once again be levelled and there will be everything to play for, for each and every conceivable political constellation either existing or likely to be formed in the wake of the upcoming state election.

The ensuing electoral result may not be unlike that obtained in 1970 which led to the state's first multi-party coalition government and the consolidation of PBB into the preeminent party it is today.

That time, a politically chastened ruling Umno was probably in favour of a ruling combination with Malay/Melanau leadership in Sarawak in the aftermath of the May 13 riots in 1969.

A PH government ruling a new Malaysia today may have less need or rationale to push too overt a Malay “agenda” in Sarawak, particularly if it can be shown that this has alienated a majority into pushing vigorously for an assertion of the state's political rights and prerogatives.

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