

WINDS OF CHANGE

There was almost a ten percentage-point drop in support for the Sarawak Barisan Nasional in the recent state election, with the biggest casualty being the Sarawak United People's Party. What contributed to the voter swing?

By S C Chan

THE outcome of the 2006 Sarawak state election for the Barisan Nasional (BN) was never in doubt. The only question was: How many of the 71 seats would fall to the Opposition and where.

As it turned out, the BN did lose seats, not four or five, as many had said, but more (nine), with the political party most adversely affected within the BN being the Sarawak United People's Party (Supp). Analysts are trying to figure out why.

The BN's share of the popular vote went down from 71.16% in 2001 to 62.14% in 2006 while the Democratic Action Party (DAP)'s share went up from 8.14% to 14.94%. Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)'s share went up from 6.94% to 8.61% but Independents/PAS (Parti Islam SeMalaysia)' share was down from 11.9% to 4.9%. Sarawak National Party (SNAP), which contested under the BN in 2001, this time around on its own garnered 9.36% of the 556,657 votes cast.

Out of the BN's nine seat losses, seven were urban or Chinese-majority seats, while the rest were Iban-majority seats. Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud's Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) contested in 35 seats and won all, but won in the Malay/Melanau seat of Saribas with the narrowest of margins (94 votes) in a straight fight with the peninsula-based PKR.

According to a senior academic with a local university, the results clearly indicate a vote swing to the Opposition (made up of a loose grouping of SNAP and PKR calling themselves Barisan Bersatu Sarawak (BBS), the DAP and PAS, apart from 20

Independents.

In the past few state elections, the trend had always been for the BN. In the 2001 general election, the Opposition only won one seat (Kidurong) and an Independent one (Meluan).

Why the voter swing to the Opposition? What are the unexpected surprises?

'The pleasant surprise is that you have a credible Opposition line-up in the country's oldest state assembly, which in the last 30 years has not been distinguished by informed and intellectual debate but rather by sycophantic idol worshipping,' he says.

Another surprise was because some BN policies such as on land matters (native customary rights or NCR land affecting the Dayaks and to a certain extent the Malays, and the renewal of landleases affecting the urban or Chinese) were out of touch with reality and not what the ordinary people had wanted. The BN paid for this in terms of their candidates being rejected in the nine seats and almost losing in several more.

The senior academic says the cause of the slip in support for the BN was also due to the 'BN not being tolerant enough', and the display of arrogance that had taken over following the massive mandates secured in the previous elections.

'Sometimes, the intelligence of the people is insulted,' was how a businessman put it. Many voters agreed with the election slogan 'Enough is enough', apparently put to good effect as the message got down to the ground in many urban centres.

When arrogance takes over and the government fails continuously to listen to the people's grouses, voters start to express their feelings forcefully, like what they did



Taib: Into his sixth term as chief minister

on May 20, particularly in Kuching.

Quietly, the unhappy electorate in Kuching took their frustration and anger to the polls and booted out four of Supp's senior leaders — Datuk Sim Kheng Hui, the Secretary-General and a State Assistant Minister in Pending, Datuk Alfred Yap, the Information and Publicity Chief and a State Assistant Minister in Kota Sentosa, Chan Seng Khai in Batu Lintang and Supp branch chairwoman Lily Yong in Padungan, who all lost to DAP candidates.

Adding insult to injury, Sim, the Supp party veteran hitherto seen as invincible, was knocked out by a DAP newcomer — 29-year-old lawyer Violet Yong Wui Wui — with an unexpectedly huge majority. The majority reverse process was a big one that must have left Sim wondering what had really gone wrong with him and the party.

Apart from this, they even voted in PKR legal advisor Dominique Ng Kim Ho in Padungan, which is smack in the heart of the Chinese heartland in Kuching. This gives lie to the claim that the Chinese would never vote for a candidate standing under the PKR symbol with some ties with PAS.

Among the Chinese electorate, the hot issues included the many deep-sea trawler fishing licences issued by the government to foreigners through local middle-men or commission agents, which has caused a lot

of unhappiness among traditional Sarawak fishermen. They see it not only as a deprivation of their only source of income but also as a serious depletion of Sarawak's fishing resources off the coast of the state.

Another factor for the popular vote swing in certain areas, according to the senior academic, was the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim factor. During the campaigning period, Anwar, accompanied by Ng, went on a walkabout to shake hands with shopkeepers in Padungan and addressed one of PKR's largest *ceramah* attended by about 3,000 people, comprising businessmen, contractors and party supporters. He also travelled to many Malay and Iban areas in other parts of the state to campaign for their candidates.

The election results, in fact, indicate a vote swing across the board — in Chinese, Malay/Melanau and Dayak areas — but more so in urban areas where the electorate are much less susceptible to the influence of money politics, according to most political analysts.

Supp leaders, after an initial post-mortem meeting following the election, described the party's eight-seat loss out of 19 seats contested as 'one of the darkest days in the history of the party'. Thanking party members and loyal supporters, it said it acknowledged their message loud and clear. 'We will take necessary action. We will make a comeback.'

The meeting was chaired by party president Tan Sri Dr George Chan Hong Nam and there were many angry and gloomy faces and loud voices during the party's emergency meeting. Two central working committee (CWC) members, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said, as expected, the top party leadership didn't acknowledge Taib's leadership as being a contributing factor to the party's disastrous outing.

'We discussed everything, except the Taib issue,' one of them said. 'They are all talking rubbish. Many of them are hypocrites.'

Observers note that the party could be heading for more trouble, if many angry members want to get into the real issues that had caused the party's big loss.

The other component parties, including Taib's PBB, are not without internal problems. Even within PBB, there are the obvious factions between a group

supporting Deputy President Datuk Seri Abang Johari Tun Openg and another group supporting Senior Vice-President and former Federal Minister Datuk Seri Adenan Satem. A highly ambitious PBB leader seen keenly interested in pushing himself forward to party treasurer post and senior state minister post is Datuk Awang Tengah Ali Hassan.

Further, on the party's position within the Malay/Melanau community, in at least three Malay/Melanau constituencies, there will be the question as to why PBB incumbent Dr Wahbi Junaidi almost lost in Saribas to PKR's Abang Zulkifli Abang Engkeh, by winning in a narrow margin.

PBB leaders must be wondering why in Beting Maro, the sole PAS candidate, Alem Din, polled nearly 2,000 votes against the incumbent and State Assistant Minister Bolhassan Di's 2,794. Is PAS making fresh inroads into Beting Maro?

Then there's Sadong Jaya, an 80% Malay/Melanau seat, where PKR's Piee Ling polled nearly 2,000 votes against PBB incumbent Datuk Wan Wahab Wan Sanusi's 2,715 votes.

In many Dayak areas, Opposition candidates didn't do too badly, indicating a definite vote swing away from the BN. These areas included Batang Ai, Ba'kelalan, Tamin, Krian, Tarat, Batu Danau and Belaga.

Perhaps, the sweetest victory was in Engkilili, where the yet-to-be-registered Malaysian Dayak Congress (MDC) protem Deputy President Dr Jonical Rayang Ngipa beat Supp's Jonathan Krai Pilo by a 426-vote majority, in spite of the awesome machinery of the BN. In the 2001 state election, Rayong lost by a few hundred votes to Supp's Toh Heng San, who was not picked to stand again this time in order to make way for an Iban in this predominantly Iban seat.

Except for urban areas, which are predominantly Chinese, according to some political analysts, the vote swing could either be a temporary phenomenon or could continue into the next election.

The factor may not just be Taib, who has been in office for more than 25 years as chief minister and who was sworn in again for his sixth term on May 21 after leading the BN to another victory.

The trend could be a reflection of the growing voice against the system already in place and manifested, according to popular

perception, in unbridled corruption, cronyism, nepotism, greed and self-aggrandisement.

On the other hand, the voter swing to the Opposition could be the beginning of an evolution of a credible political party alternative that could one day take over from the BN. Will the DAP find common ground to work with PKR, SNAP and other like-minded Opposition parties?

Taib remains in the good books of the Federal leaders, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, who came to Sarawak to campaign vigorously for the BN. He has delivered many parliamentary seats and the BN is still very much in control in Sarawak, one of the most important states to the Federal Government as far as contribution to the national coffers is concerned, with its oil and gas revenue.

Contrary to claims that Taib's control may be slipping, he is still very much at the forefront, not only in PBB but in other component parties as well, including Supp. Now, he wants the two Dayak-based parties — PRS and SPDP — to merge after the election, in an attempt to bring the Ibans together under a single political party.

But it is believed he may go for further party consolidation that will involve PBB and the newly emerged entity to pave the way for the eventual entry of Umno into Sarawak.

There does not seem to be anything standing in the way of that happening at the moment. Such a move is not unnecessarily something that will be less appealing even to the present Dayak Opposition groups, who see the direct intervention of the Federal Government as a way out of their present economic and political plight, after watching helplessly the de-registration of SNAP and Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS), a move they say Taib could have prevented if he had wanted to.

Therefore, a drop in popular votes is the least of Taib's worries, as the winning principle based on the first to past the post seems to ensure, at least in the context of Sarawak party politics, that the BN can always be expected to secure a strong majority, which is necessary for any amendment to the constitution. And Taib's BN has got its strong mandate renewed for another five years. **mb**