

Malaysia's Sarawak State Elections 2006 Understanding a Break in the BN Armor¹



Bridget Welsh, Ph.D.
Southeast Asia Studies
Johns Hopkins University- SAIS
Report Prepared for National Democratic Institute
September 2006

¹ This report is drawn from two weeks of fieldwork in Sarawak during the election campaign, polling day and immediate post-election period in May 2006 and follow-up interviews conducted in July and August in 2006 Sarawak and West Malaysia. Special thanks to Ong Kian Ming, who assisted with the statistical analysis and whose collaboration on our manuscript on Malaysian elections helped to frame issues, Andrew Aeria, Nelson Mersat, James Chin, Faisal Syam, and Khoo Kay Jin in Sarawak, and Abdul Malek of West Malaysia/MAFREL and Liew Chin Tong who provided feedback during/after the election, the kindness of Sarawakian politicians and political observers in sharing their insights, and the hospitality of the Sarawak people. The errors in this report and opinions expressed are my own.

On May 20th, 2006 Malaysia held the ninth state elections in the state of Sarawak. While the BN captured 87% of the seats (61:72) and continues to dominate the state legislature, the opposition managed to send shock waves by winning an unexpected 8 seats and 47.2% of the popular vote. The remaining seat was won by an independent. For the first time since the 1987 election, the opposition emerged as an important player in this state, long considered a stronghold for the incumbent *Barisan Nasional* (BN). This report explains why the opposition was more successful at the polls, and draws attention to ongoing problems in the electoral process in Sarawak and limits on democratic space. Many of these problems are endemic in Malaysia as a whole. Following a long pattern of unfair elections, the Sarawak contest was conducted with media bias, vote buying, electoral manipulation and unfair use of state resources and was carried out in a climate of insecurity and ethnic-based mobilization that limits choices at the polls. Despite the uneven terrain, the opposition managed to win victories, although primarily in Chinese majority constituencies. These developments point to the potential for future electoral gains for the opposition.

This report shows that while the obstacles to expanding democratic electoral space in Sarawak remain considerable, and go beyond the electoral process; however, with committed and collective work on the part of the opposition, broader representation is possible.

Sarawak: Unique yet Important BN Terrain

Sarawak is Malaysia's largest state, comprising 124,450 sq kilometers, and is as large as the entire Malay Peninsula. Located on East Malaysia, Sarawak has a different history and ethnic composition than the "peninsula" as West Malaysia is known. Sarawak was incorporated into the Federation of Malaya in 1963, six years after West Malaysia, then "Malaya", gained independence. During the colonial era, Sarawak was ruled by the Brooke family, or "White Rajahs" through World War II. After the war ended, Sarawak became a British protectorate that after protracted discussions and negotiations was incorporated into the Federation along with Sabah and Singapore. Singapore was subsequently expelled from the Federation in 1965, leaving the two East Malaysian states a part of what was then and is now called "Malaysia."

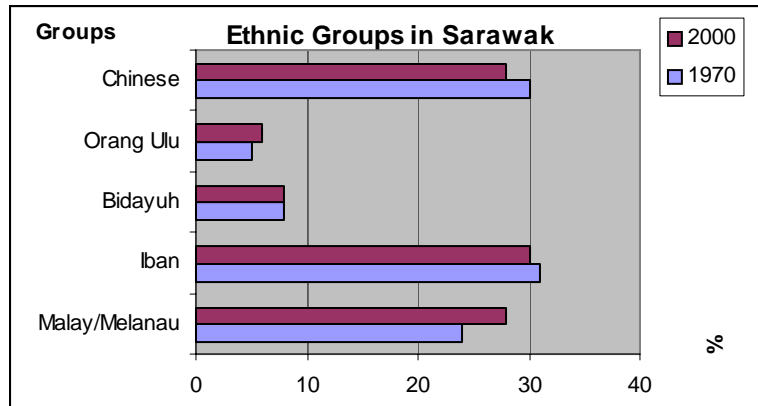
Sarawak has maintained its own unique political identity, shaped by history, geography and demography. Its entrance into Malaysia, largely without consultation with the local population, inspired resistance by the communists in the 1960s, and put the issue of Sarawak nationalism into the political arena. Sarawakians resent the control and interference of the "peninsula" in local affairs. This has led to strong support for local autonomy in decision-making, including support for local leaders, and disgruntlement over the allocation of resources, particularly the rich oil and gas resources of the state, for which Sarawakians only receive a 5% royalty. Sarawak's large territory has created its own set of issues. Control over land in the rural areas is highly politicized. Through the 1990s concern centered on the deforestation of its lush natural reserves. Most of the

leases were given to logging companies with close political ties to the regime.² In recent years, as the forests have become depleted, attention has moved to palm oil production, which has also involved state leases. The state government has often usurped control over local communities holding customary rights, especially the native community of Dayaks. In return, the state has promised to allocate benefits, and has invested highly in infrastructure projects, which has been allocated primarily along lines of political loyalty. Poverty in the rural areas of Sarawak remains extremely high, the second highest in Malaysia (after Kelantan) according to a recent UNDP assessment, fostering a dependence in the rural areas on state benefits.³ There is thus, not surprisingly, a sharp divide between urban and rural voters and voting patterns reflect these differences, with rural areas showing more loyalty to the incumbent BN government.

Yet, the most important feature shaping Sarawakian politics is ethnicity, its demography. This follows the pattern elsewhere in the country. Unlike West Malaysia, Sarawak's 2.5 million populace is comparatively more ethnically heterogeneous. There are over 28 separate ethnic groups identified in Sarawak. The Malaysian census, however, centralized these groups into five major categories, illustrated in the chart below. The largest ethnic group is Iban, who now comprise 30% of the population, down from 31% in 1970. This community is primarily located in the rural areas, and fragmented politically. The second largest group is the Chinese, who comprised 30% of the population in 1970 and still comprise 28% of the state. They are primarily located in Sarawak's urban areas. Like the Iban, there are sharp intra-ethnic divisions within this community, around different *pangs* which speak different dialects, which play out within political parties and regionally. The Malay Melanau, which are actually two distinct groups, have grown the most over time, from 24% in 1970 to 28% and are on the coastal areas, which have become increasingly urbanized. The Melanau have been seen to have special political access, since 1970 the chief ministers in the state have traditionally come from this community. The Orang Ulu located primarily in the hinterland, have remained a small but important minority, moving from 5% of the population in 1970 to 6% in 2000, while the Bidayuh, which have been traditionally rural but become increasingly urbanized through migration, have remained 8% of the population. Similar to West Malaysia, political parties, political mobilization and campaign issues are organized along these ethnic cleavages, as is the delineation of electoral constituencies, yielding different representation for different communities.

² See Andrew Aeria. 2002. "Politics, Business, the State and Development in Sarawak, 1970-2000." Ph.D. Thesis. University of London.

³ See http://www.undp.org.my/index.php?navi_id=132.



The critical issue of representation has played itself out in elections. Sarawak held its first state election in 1963, shortly before its entry into the Federation. During the colonial period, Sarawak did not develop the practice of elections, as representatives in the legislative councils, which formed from the 1930s, were appointed. Sarawak’s introduction to elections within Malaysia was unique, and has remained so, with the timing of elections following its own calendar, the date set by the state chief minister in consultation with the prime minister. Elections are required to be held every five years, with the elections usually called around the end of the fourth year. Since its independence in 1963, Sarawak has held a total of nine state elections, (1970, 1974, 1979, 1983, 1987, 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006) with the timing of the parliamentary and state elections following different trajectories and the BN securing a decisive victory in every election.⁴ In the case of the 2006 state elections, the current chief minister of Sarawak Tan Sri Taib Mahmud waited until the fifth year to dissolve the state assembly, as he did for the 2001 and 1996 polls.

Sarawak is one of five states in Malaysia where the governing BN coalition wins an overwhelming victory, over 90% of the seats. The other states are Melaka, Perlis, Negri Sembilan and Johor. Sarawak’s elections have taken on special significance, since they are usually held on a different timeline and are thus a public measure of the support of the incumbent government, which uses its results in Sarawak to illustrate legitimacy. In 1996 the BN won 56 of the 62 seats (90.3%), winning 19 of these uncontested and 65.9% of the popular vote. In 2001 the BN only lost one seat and won four uncontested, winning 61 (98.3%) of the seats and 71.9% of the popular vote. Sarawak’s state elections are traditionally seen as even stronger mandates for the BN than the parliamentary contests, as was the case in both the 1999 and 2004 parliamentary elections, where the BN marginally lost its share of the popular vote, but still maintained a stronghold on the overwhelming majority of seats.

BN dominance in Sarawak politics has comprised a coalition of parties, including the Malay/Melanau *Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Sarawak* (PBB) led by the current chief

⁴ For excellent analysis of these earlier elections, see Michael Leigh. *The Rising Moon: Political Change in Sarawak*. (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1974) or R.S. Milne & K.J. Ratnam. *Malaysia-New States in a New Nation*. (London: Frank Cass, 1974).

minister Taib Mahmud, the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP), the state's oldest party which formed in 1959 and is the main Chinese party, *Parti Rakyat Sarawak* (PRS) which represents a combination of Iban and Chinese representatives, and the mainly Iban Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP). Parties have moved out of the governing coalition over the years, particularly Iban-based parties. The two most important Iban parties were the Sarawak National Party (SNAP), the first Iban-nationalist party formed in 1961 that is now in opposition and the *Parti Bangsa Dayak Sarawak* (PBDS) founded in 1983 after a split from SNAP. PBDS did not contest in the 2006 polls since it was deregistered in October 2004.⁵ All of these parties have been dominated by specific leaders and remain highly personalized. The most prominent figure in BN Sarawak politics has been chief minister Taib Mahmud, who has been in power since 1981 and has been seen to be an extraordinarily adept leader in using "divide and rule" tactics in dealing with the Iban and Chinese political leaders to stay in office and maintain Malay/Melanau political control, despite comprising the third largest ethnic group.

Sarawak's Electoral Framework and Problem Areas:

Elections are the arena where the BN perpetuates its power and, arguably, provides an opportunity for opposition parties to gain power. The electoral framework, however, is highly skewed in favor of the incumbent coalition. Through manipulation of the electoral system, politicization of ethnicity, control over state resources, media bias and outright vote buying, the BN maintains electoral advantage.

The bias in Sarawak's elections begins with the electoral system. Malaysia is a first-past-the-post system, which assures that the winner-takes-all. This system favors the dominant party, who has the resources to mobilize at the polls, and skews the results in favor of the party that wins a plurality of votes. Consistently, the BN wins a greater share of seats at the polls than its popular support or "seat bonus", aptly illustrated in the 2001 state polls where the BN won 98% of the seats and only 72% of the popular vote.

Yet the bias extends beyond the electoral system to agencies within the state, namely the Electoral Commission (EC), the Registrar of Societies (RoS) and the police force. Since 1961, the EC has been politically aligned with the incumbent government, with limited autonomy.⁶ This bureaucratic agency determines the rules that govern elections and administers the process. Both activities regularly come under criticism for bias. The head of the EC, Tan Sri Rashid bin Abdul Rahman, is a political appointee that reports directly to the prime minister's department. His public comments often reinforce

⁵ See James Chin (2004). "Sabah and Sarawak: The More Things Change, The More They Remain The Same", in Chin Kin Wah & D. Singh (eds.) *South East Asian Affairs 2004* (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies)

⁶ See Lim Hong Hai. (1997) "The Malaysian Electoral System: Its Formation and Change." Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur and his chapters in Mavis Puthuchery and Noraini Othman. (eds.) *Elections and Democracy in Malaysia*. (Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Press, 2005). See also: Khoo Kay Jin and Andrew Aeria. 2002. "Elections and the Electoral Commission in Sarawak." Paper presented at IKMAS workshop on the Electoral System in Malaysia (August) and Andrew Aeria 2003. "Elections and the Electoral System in Sarawak," Paper presented at the IKMAS Workshop to Finalize Research on the Electoral System in Malaysia, (January).

a perception that the EC is politically aligned. Consider, for example, his following revealing statement on the EC's website: "Threats to stability are ever present. The political and social cleavages within the multi racial, multi ethnic and multi religious composition of its population require the right political chemistry and solutions. The existence of a few of what some people referred to as draconian laws are found to be absolutely necessary."⁷ The most frequent areas of concern are limits on campaigning (including the rights to assembly and free speech), review of and checks on campaign financing, the accuracy of the electoral roll and bias of polling officials.

The RoS has the power to shape which party can contest in the polls through the registration process, and has played a role in determining the line-up in elections. In 2006, the deregistration of PBDS forced candidates from this party to realign or run as independents. The newly-formed coalition, Malaysian Dayak Congress (MDC), similarly was not allowed to register and its candidates ran under another banner. The threat of deregistration of SNAP was a cloud over the opposition party throughout the election, whose departure from the BN in 2004 opened them up to scrutiny by the RoS.

Like the RoS, the Malaysian police are seen to favor the incumbent government in setting permits for public meetings, using the intelligence services or Special Branch to collect information for BN parties and adjudicating the law. Comparatively, the police is the most professional and independent of all the state agencies highlighted, particularly on polling day where the interests of maintaining order predominate. Yet, there is little dispute that the BN has the advantage within the bureaucracy administering the election.

Malaysians are mobilized primarily along ethnic lines and its parties are ethnically-based. Sarawak is no exception, as ethnic parties are seen as representative vehicles for communities and ethnicity is the main cleavage used to mobilize voters. This is true not only within the BN coalition but also within the opposition traditionally. It is also the lens through which the EC delineates constituencies. Every eight years, Malaysia undergoes a "delimitation" exercise, redrawing constituency boundaries. Since Sarawak has followed a different timeline in elections, it has also followed a different timeline for delimitation, with the last delimitation occurring in 2005, a year before the state elections. As Table 2 shows, since 1970 the number of seats has almost doubled, and the ethnic distribution of seats has changed, with Malays/Melanau receiving a greater portion than their share of the population and the Iban and Chinese less than their share.⁸ In 2006, as a result of a directive to increase the number of mixed seats on the peninsula and the perception that mixed seats work in the BN's interest electorally (which was the case in the 2004 parliamentary elections after the 2003 parliamentary delimitation) the number of mixed constituencies were increased in Sarawak, changing the ethnic allocations.⁹ Many

⁷ <http://www.spr.gov.my/electoraldemo.htm>

⁸ The 1970 and 2001 data is drawn from Michael Leigh, (2003), "Sarawak Elections: 2001", unpublished paper.

⁹ This was a national trend, resulting from the loss of support for the BN among the Malay community, in the 1999 parliamentary election. For more discussion of the 2003 delineation exercise see Ong Kian Ming's chapter and Ong Kian Ming & Bridget Welsh's chapter in Mavis Puthuchearu and Noraini Othman. (eds.) *Elections and Democracy in Malaysia*. (Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Press, 2005).

of these mixed seats distributed Malay, Chinese and Iban voters in an effort to further boost the BN's electoral fortunes. As part of the delimitation exercise voters were moved into new seats, often in large numbers as was the case with N45 Bukit Assek in 2003, which was seen to reduce the chances of an opposition victory.

Table 1: Sarawak Seat Allocation by Ethnicity

Ethnic Group	1970		1987		1996/2001		2006	
	Seats	Perce nt	Seats	Perce nt	Seats	Perce nt	Seats	Perce nt
Malay/Melanau	11	25	12	33.3	22	40.3	16	22.5
Iban	23	58.3	17	37.5	15	27.4	16	22.5
Bidayuh	-	-	4	8.3	4	6.5	5	7.0
Orang Ulu	-	-	2	4.2	3	4.8	3	4.2
Chinese	7	16.7	7	16.7	12	20.9	11	15.5
Mixed							20	28.2
Total	48	100	48	100	62	100		100

It is important to realize that Sarawak holds a disproportionate voice in Malaysian politics vis-a-vis the size of its population. As part of the agreement to enter the Federation in 1963, East Malaysia was assured a third of the seats in the national parliament or *Dewan Rakyat*. This has resulted in voters in Sarawak, one of the least populated states in Malaysia, having disproportionate representation in the national parliament and has contributed to mal-apportionment in Malaysia's electoral system as a whole. Within Sarawak there are also large differences in the size of the constituencies, from Pending comprised of 29,503 voters to Ba'Kelalan comprised of 6,284 voters. Not all the voters have the same level of representation, with rural areas having fewer voters per constituency and comparatively more representation per voter.

The bias in the system is accentuated by the politicization of ethnicity. Since parties are organized along ethnic lines, representation is defined ethnically, with Malay parties, for example, representing Malays, Chinese parties representing Chinese and so forth. As is the case in West Malaysia, there is a pecking order in the political power of different ethnic based parties, with Malay political power given a dominant role. While Sarawak's Malay/Melanau party PBB does not hold the level of power that the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) holds in West Malaysia, its dominance in the political system has been consolidated with over thirty years of political supremacy in Sarawak. PBB, unlike UMNO, however is comprised of two ethnic communities, Malays and Melanau, with the chief minister of Melanau origin. This has caused friction within these two groups, but has not interfered with its favored political position within the state government. In contrast, the Iban, who are also *bumiputera* (indigenous, or literally "sons of the soil"), and the largest ethnic group in the state, are lower on the pecking order, arguably behind the Malays and Chinese. Iban political power is fragmented, sometimes through the intervention of the chief minister in Iban political parties and through the

calculating playing off of leaders against each other.¹⁰ The end result is that the Iban political voice is muted, especially when compared to that of the Malay community. The Chinese are seen to have a subservient role to the Malays although, comparatively, parties like the SUPP in Sarawak have more political power than their counterparts within the BN coalition on the peninsula, the MCA and Gerakan.¹¹ Chinese political power in Sarawak is derived from their continued important role in business, especially in logging. Over the past five years, as the predominantly peninsular-controlled palm oil sector has expanded and displaced many local Chinese businessmen, the economic clout of Sarawak Chinese has declined, and their political voice has become less articulate than in the past. Greater political fragmentation has set in amongst Chinese leaders, also egged on by the political maneuvers of the chief minister. For voters, the ethnic configuration of the polity places limits on their choices at the polls, as their level of representation is seen as predefined in an ethnic pecking order, and the BN as a multi-ethnic coalition is portrayed as the only vehicle to guarantee ethnic representation and security for all the groups.

Representation in Malaysia is also shaped by the allocation of state resources. At every election, the BN government uses public spending, patronage and the promise of allocation to win support. Scholars such as Francis Loh and Andrew Aeria have deemed this the “politics of developmentalism,” and argued that control over state finances has been an essential ingredient in winning support at the polls.¹² In the months before the election, and during the campaign period, promises of funding, especially for infrastructure projects such as roads, increase. Leaders use these as inducements, and, in some cases, threaten to withdraw these funds if political support for the BN is not sustained. The line between campaign promises and intimidation remains ambiguous, yet, with open threats of ending projects that affect the livelihoods of communities, especially in rural areas, it is often crossed.

Where there is no hesitancy in crossing the line during elections is in the use of state personnel for campaigning. Local district officers, who were appointed by the BN government, are usually the election returning officer and in some case de facto the local campaign manager for the BN candidate, especially in rural areas. The BN uses government facilities and equipment, in the form of cars, boats and helicopters, to support BN candidates, and in some cases monopolizes the routes to remote locations, preventing

¹⁰ For an excellent background to these issues see Jayum A. Jawan *The Iban Factor in Sarawak Politics*. (Serdang: Penerbit Universiti Pertanian Malaysia, 1993) and Peter Searle. *Politics in Sarawak, 1970-1976: The Iban Perspective*. (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1983)

¹¹ For an excellent background to these issues see Chin Ung-Ho (James). *Chinese Politics in Sarawak: A Study of the Sarawak United People's Party*. (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1997)

¹² Andrew Aeria has highlighted the issue of development in his work. See 1997a “The Politics of Development and the 1996 Sarawak: State Elections,” In Francis Loh Kok Wah (Ed) *Sabah and Sarawak: The Politics of Development and Federalism. Kajian Malaysia* Special Issue. 15: 1/2 (June/December): 57-83 and for a discussion of the concept of “developmentalism” see Loh Kok Wah (Francis). “Developmentalism and the Limits of Democratic Discourse,” In Francis Loh Kok Wah and Khoo Boo Teik (eds). *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices*. (Nordic Institute of Asian Studies. Curzon, 2002), pp. 19-50 and chapter one in Loh Kok Wah (Francis) and Johan Saravanamuttu. (eds.) *New Politics of Malaysia*. (Singapore: ISEAS, 2003)

opposition candidates from campaigning. The large distances within the state, which increases the logistical costs of campaigns, accentuate the critical advantage that state resources play in Sarawak. Technically, local government officials are not permitted to engage in campaigning, but the prevalence of this practice, which includes state vehicles flying BN flags, is rampant.

What makes the practice even more biased is the fact that many of these state officials assist candidates and their agents in vote buying. This practice is especially common in rural areas, where elections provide a means of earning much needed revenue. One shopkeeper in rural Kanowit reported that her business during election time, particularly the night before the election, increased four-fold with the sudden influx of funds. Voters are paid, usually in cash, funds in the range of RM20(US\$5) to RM200 (US\$54) for supporting candidates. This practice is concentrated among BN parties, but is not exclusive to the BN. This practice is well-known, but lacks comprehensive evidence. In 1996, however, the Election Commission declared the election result for the Bukit Begunan constituency null and void due to rampant vote buying.¹³ In urban areas the practice of vote buying is usually (although not always) less direct and can take the form of manipulating the gambling odds on a candidate.¹⁴ In these instances, a private businessman will make an unreported campaign donation that changes the campaign odds for a candidate, making it more attractive for voters to support one candidate, usually a BN candidate, over another. This provides an incentive for voters to vote for the favored candidate, since they will win financially if the candidate wins. The prevalence of gambling, especially in close races, has been a decisive factor in outcomes, as was the case in the 2001 seat of Bukit Assek. Gambling may also tilt the balance in favor of the opposition; in the same seat of Bukit Assek in 1996 a local lawyer Wong Ho Leng defeated the BN incumbent Wong Soon Kai.

These practices take place in a context that lacks an independent media. Sarawak has a collection of local newspapers in a variety of languages – Malay, Chinese and English. These papers include: *Eastern Times*, *Utusan Sarawak*, *Sin Chew Daily*, *International Times*, *See Hua Daily* and *The Borneo Post*. All the newspapers operate in a climate of censorship and limits on their reporting. In February 2006, *The Sarawak Tribune's* license was revoked for reproducing the cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed. This served as an important reminder before the election of the consequences of independent reporting. The Malaysian government uses the Printing and Press Act to control newspapers.¹⁵ What is not seen is that many of the newspapers are granted licenses in the first place if their owners favor the BN.¹⁶ The close ties between

¹³ See Andrew Aeria, 1997b. "Election Bribery Exposed. Courts Find Evidence of Voter-Buying," in *Aliran Monthly*, 17(1):2-7.

¹⁴ See Michael Goldman, 1997. "Contemporary Chinese Politics in Sarawak: A View from Kuching and Sibiu," *Kajian Malaysia*. 15/1-2: 84-147, for a discussion of this practice in 1996.

¹⁵ See Mustafa K. Anuar. 2004. "Muzzled? The Media in Mahathir's Malaysia," in Bridget Welsh (ed.) *Reflections: The Mahathir Years*. Washington, D.C.: Southeast Asia Studies, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS

¹⁶ See Edmund Terence Gomez, 2004. "Politics of the Media Business," in Bridget Welsh (ed.), *Reflections: The Mahathir Years*. Washington, D.C.: Southeast Asia Studies, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS

the BN leadership and newspapers is well established and Sarawak is no exception. Radio and television remain closely aligned to the BN, with the latter minimally reporting on the Sarawak election due to its focus on West Malaysia. Infractions of the electoral law are rarely reported in any of the mediums, and opposition candidates traditionally face more obstacles in getting coverage. Internet usage is limited to the urban areas, and limited in scope. As such, independent websites like *malaysiakini* and blogs only reach a small share of voters and are accessed primarily by West Malaysians.

All the Sarawak candidates campaign within a legal framework. The main legislation that governs elections in Malaysia includes: a) Articles 113 to 120 and the Thirteenth Schedule of the Federal Constitution and relevant articles in the respective State Constitutions; b) Election Act, 1958 (Act 19) c) Election Offences Act, 1954 (Act 5) d) Elections (Conduct of Elections) Regulations, 1981, e) Elections (Registration of Electors) Regulations, 2002, and f) Elections (Postal Voting) Regulations 2003. These bills have been regularly amended, with sharp variation in the impact of these changes on the electoral playing field. Recent amendments illustrate this variation: under the electoral law, unsuccessful candidates may appeal election results to special election courts in instances of alleged fraud, vote tampering, or other infractions of electoral rules. Yet in March, 2000, the scope of petitions was narrowed when the High Court ruled that the Election Commission and returning officers may not be named as "necessary parties." In July that year the Malaysian parliament passed an amendment to the electoral law that forbid judicial scrutiny of voter rolls after the Election Commission certified them. This severely curtailed the right to question the electoral roll. In 2002, however, the parliament passed a series of amendments, which included granting a right of appeal for an election petition. At the same time, it increased the deposits for candidates to RM10,000 (US\$2,750) from RM5000 (US\$1,350), making the cost of candidacy higher, and increased campaign spending limits, bringing official limits on campaign expenditures more in line with actual spending patterns. In 2005 there were additional amendments in this electoral legislation, which were implemented for the first time in Sarawak. These included a mandatory recount at the polling station when the difference in victory margin is less than 4% (previously the practice was conducted when the victory margin was 2%) and curtailing which civil servants could be postal voters. The amendments range from narrowing the system to increasing fairness, with a tendency toward the former when the legal framework potentially jeopardizes the fortunes of BN candidates. Importantly, the Sarawak contest was also the first time that ballot papers did not have serial numbers.

Elections in Malaysia follow a similar logistical pattern. In the months before the election, the incumbent government begins its campaign, through government-linked newspapers and the allocation of projects. At the state level, the chief minister dissolves the legislature, setting the nomination day and the length of the campaign. In Sarawak chief minister Taib Mahmud set May 9th as nomination day and an eleven-day campaign period, from May 10-May 19th, one of the longer campaigns in Sarawak's recent history. Generally, a longer campaign in Malaysia is seen to advantage the opposition, since it allows for more time to campaign. However, in the case of Sarawak, it has mixed implications, in that it also increases the cost of campaigning for the opposition in rural areas.

Profile of the 2006 Political Parties in Sarawak

Voters in Sarawak were offered a variety of choices at the polls, depending on their constituency. Generally, most contests were two-corner fights. This was the result of a pact among the opposition not to contest against each other and an overall reduction in the number of independent candidates. The number of three-corner fights dropped to zero in 2006 from 5 in the 2001 polls, indicating a consolidation of the opposition as a whole. The number of independent candidates also decreased; only 15 contests (21.1%) had independent candidates, with only one N4 Meradong slating more than two independent candidates. This was also a drop from 42 (69.2%) of the contests in the 2001 polls, suggesting that the impact of raising the costs of campaigns in the form of larger deposits had an effect.

The BN was and is comprised of four parties in Sarawak. Dominated by the PBB or United Sarawak Native Inheritance Party, the BN also includes the Chinese-based Sarawak United People's Party or SUPP, Iban-dominant Sarawak People's Party or PRS (with some Chinese leaders) and the Iban-Bumiputera-Chinese Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party or SPDP. Both the PBB and SUPP are long-standing parties in Sarawakian politics. The PRS and SPDP are relative newcomers, formed from splits and leadership crises from earlier parties in the Sarawak BN. The PRS was formed after the leadership crisis in PBDS led to its deregistration in 2004, and was quickly allowed to join the BN, while SPDP has a longer tenure but is still considered a marginal party in Sarawak politics. Both the PRS and SPDP are primarily Iban-based. Table 2 details the breakdown of contests by party, and shows the dominance of the PBB electorally. The table also shows that political parties have shifted their loyalty to the BN from 2001, with both PBDS (not allowed to contest in 2006) and SNAP no longer part of the incumbent coalition.

SNAP currently is one of the core parties in the Sarawak opposition, which was and remains comprised of four parties. The strongest party in the opposition is the DAP, which had won one seat (Bintulu) in the 2001 polls. The DAP had left the *Barisan Alternatif* (Alternative Front or BA) before the 2001 Sarawak state elections and opted for a "go-it-alone" strategy in the 2006 elections, although they reached an unpublicized agreement not to contest against other parties from 2003 and to allow *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR) to contest in the traditionally DAP seat of Padungan in return for not contesting the 2004 parliamentary election. PKR joined forces with SNAP to form a united front in campaigns, known as *Barisan Bersatu Sarawak* (BBS) or Sarawak United Front, which allowed these parties to consolidate and more effectively distribute resources. The PKR/SNAP pact also incorporated candidates from the Malaysian Dayak Congress (MDC), a party that was not allowed to register before the election and subsequently was also denied registration. PAS was the fourth party contesting, and after urging from other opposition parties, especially Keadilan, on the grounds that the party would detract from other opposition parties due to its Islamist agenda and negative perceptions among non-Muslims (who comprise the overwhelming majority in Sarawak) reduced the number of seats it contested in the state from 3 to 1. Overall, the opposition

was more united, and showed greater cooperation in its campaign, yet at least two the parties, DAP and PAS operated autonomously.

Table 2: Political Parties in Sarawak Elections

<i>Political Parties</i>	<i>Seats Contested 2006</i>	<i>Seats Contested 2001</i>
<i>BN</i>		
PBB	35	30
SUPP	19	17
PRS	9	--
SPDP	8	--
PBDS	--	8
SNAP	--	7
<i>Total</i>	<i>71</i>	<i>62</i>
<i>Opposition</i>		
DAP	12	13
PKR (Keadilan)	25	21
SNAP	28	--
PAS	1	3
STAR	--	5
<i>Total</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>42</i>

Profile of the 2006 Sarawak State Candidates

The Sarawak polls offered voters an impressive slate of candidates from both the BN coalition and opposition; as Table 3 shows, nearly a third of the candidates had professional backgrounds, i.e. lawyers, doctors, accountants or academicians, a quarter were businessmen and a fifth were retired civil servants. The remainder were teachers, community leaders (9.4%), university degree holders (9.4%) or religious scholars (2.2%). This pattern varied marginally between the BN coalition and opposition, with the BN slating more former civil servants and teachers, and the opposition comprised of more professionals and businessmen.

Table 3: Profession Background of Sarawak State Candidates¹⁷

		Civil Servant	Professional	University Degree no Profession/ White Collar ¹⁸	Religious Scholar/Teacher	Businessman	Teacher/ Community Leader
2006	<i>Overall</i>	21.7%	30.4%	9.4%	2.2%	24.6%	9.4%
	BN	25.4%	26.8%	11.3%	2.8%	18.3%	14.1%
	Opposition	17.9%	34.3%	7.5%	1.5%	31.3%	4.5%

¹⁷ This table is drawn from extensive interviews with politicians and political party members in Sarawak, as well as the publication of candidate profiles in the *Eastern Times* and *The Borneo Post*.

¹⁸ This category excludes professionals and often captures individuals who completed university and started working directly for political parties immediately after their degrees.

The 2006 election offered voters the largest number of women candidates in Sarawak history. The BN slated six women candidates, 8.4% of their overall list. Two of these women were uncontested, Murni Suhaili and Fatimah Abdullah, both from PBB. The opposition slated 4 female candidates, 5.7% of the opposition alternatives, and two of these women, Violet Yong and Ting Tze Fui, won on the DAP ticket. The DAP opposition party slated the largest number of female candidates, three candidates out of the twelve seats (25%) the party contested. These figures overall however, fall short of the national average of 10% of female candidates in Malaysia, yet represented a milestone for female candidates in the traditionally conservative state of Sarawak. The state assembly is now comprised of 5.6% of women, up from 2.8% in 2001.

Despite the impressive qualifications and increased representation of women, the Sarawak candidates, especially those from the BN, did not offer that many fresh faces to voters. The BN offered only 18 news faces, and many of these were children of earlier candidates. An overwhelming majority of the candidates from the BN were incumbents and 69.7% of these incumbents won contests. (Only one opposition member was in the 2001 state assembly, Chiew Chiu Sing of Bintulu from the DAP. He was reelected.) Many of the candidates slated had some sort of rumored scandal. Interviews in Sarawak revealed that almost half of the BN candidates 49.3% had a scandal tainting their candidacy, either involving morality/sex (i.e. second wives, mistresses, gambling, drinking) or abuses of power (i.e. corruption, misuse of office for personal gain), as shown in Table 4. The opposition did not offer a fully clean slate either, with 14.9% of its candidates tainted by rumors associated with morality. The majority of these tainted opposition candidates were from SNAP or Keadilan.

Table 4: Scandals and Sarawak Candidates

		Scandal Corruption/Abuse Power	Scandal- Morality/Sex	Scandal Other	Scandal-None
2006	Overall	10.9%	22.5%	3.6%	63.8%
	BN	19.7%	29.6%	4.2%	50.7%
	Opposition	1.5%	14.9%	3.0%	77.6%

Profile of Sarawak Voters

As of May 2006, there were 892,537 voters on Sarawak’s electoral roll, less than a third of Sarawak’s 2.5 million residents. As shown in Table 5, a close look at the 2004 electoral roll profile of voters by ethnicity shows that only a small share of voters in the state are Malay, and that the construction of Malay seats and dominance of PBB in the system reflects a larger bias than would be the case looking at population data; Malay voters make up a much smaller share of voters than their seat allocation. This is likely to shift over time as demographic trends shift, and a larger share of Malay voters become of voting age.

Table 5: Voters by Ethnicity in Malaysia

<i>Region/Race</i>	<i>Malay</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Indian</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>East Malaysia Bumiputera</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Peninsular</i>	4,904,492	2,837,678	731,011	74,169	14,609	8,561,959
	57.3%	33.1%	8.5%	0.9%	0.2%	100%
<i>Sarawak</i>	88,486	304,161	1,928	4,514	505,257	904,345
	9.8%	33.6%	0.2%	0.5%	55.9%	100%
<i>Sabah</i>	202,526	160,929	6,062	22,770	398,393	790,680
	25.6%	20.4%	0.8%	2.9%	50.4%	100%
<i>Total</i>	5,195,504	3,302,767	739,001	101,453	918,259	10,256,984

Source: 2004 Electoral Roll. In collaboration with Ong Kian Ming of Duke University.

Sarawak's unique history, however, distinguishes its voter profile from that of states in West Malaysia. Detailed in Table 6, Sarawak has fewer female voters than men, reflecting the pioneer nature of the state and the structure of employment in logging and oil and gas. It also has a higher proportion of older voters, a product of the large share of Chinese voters in the state that have a lower birth rate. The high level of out-migration has also contributed to the lower share of voters under 35.

Table 6: Age and Gender Profile of Sarawak Voters

<i>Age</i>	
Under 35 years	18.2%
From 35 to 55 years	49.6%
Over 55 years	32.2%
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	49.3%
Male	50.7%

Source: 2006 Sarawak Electoral Roll. In collaboration with Ong Kian Ming of Duke University.

Campaigning and Campaign Issues

The eleven-day campaign began with the political parties laying out their manifestos and key issues. The government lifted the ban on helicopter flights to ease travel for campaigning, allowing for a broader dissemination of messages. For the BN, the main messages were development and stability, traditional campaign themes, all under the manifesto banner, "A Peaceful, Progressive and Prosperous Sarawak." Their 2006 focus was on reinforcing these traditional campaign messages and reaffirming that the BN deserved a continued mandate. They placed heavy emphasis on rural development, notably agricultural expansion in palm oil, pepper and cocoa. Campaign ads pictured the construction of new buildings and roads or lush fields of palm oil in rural areas, and stressed that continued projects were dependent on political loyalty. From

chief minister Taib Mahmud to new candidates, a link between the prosperity and a fresh BN mandate was made clear.

A sample of the chief minister's campaign speech is illustrative: "It is the policy of the government to always help the people, and that is why we have a development plan. Since the First Malaysia Plan (1MP), the government has spent hundreds of billions of *ringgit* to provide the infrastructure and basic amenities for the *rakyat* (people). They [the opposition] have no capital to help the people so they spread lies, but do you want to wait another 50 years to see development to your area?" Chief Minister Taib Mahmud, speaking in rural Bekenu.¹⁹

The BN candidates, especially those in the rural areas, relied on SELCRA, one of Sarawak's important rural agencies involved in land development and agricultural schemes, to highlight available financing for villages. In visits throughout the state, BN politicians opened up offices or allocated projects under the SELCRA umbrella. Immediately before the election, the government opened Rural Growth Centres (RGC) in areas such as Opar, the location of a new constituency. The centres were characterized as logistical areas to create "job opportunities and income generation and all were intended for the people's interests."²⁰ They expanded their allocation during the election period, particularly through the active campaign of Minister for Rural and Regional Development, Abdul Aziz Bin Shamsudin, who opened up centers throughout the state and noted that a sum of RM2.12 (US\$57) billion would be explicitly allocated to rural development.

To buttress this message, the 2006 campaign linked Sarawak's future to the implementation of the 9th Malaysia Plan, which was released in March. Every five years Malaysia produces a development plan, outlining public spending allocations. The May election provided an opportunity for the BN to showcase this plan, and simultaneously use its bounty to win support. The BN government announced that RM13.4 (US\$3.62) billion would be allocated to Sarawak and throughout the campaign used this allocation to win support. For example, Plantation Industries and Commodities Minister Peter Chin used this issue explicitly in his campaigning in rural Lundu, where he noted that the bulk of RM74 (US\$20) million and RM83.75 (US\$22.6) million for boosting cocoa and pepper production respectively would be allocated in Sarawak.²¹ In another instance, PBB candidate Awang Tengah highlighted RM400 (US\$108) million for improving the electricity supply through the RES grid enhancement.²² Samy Vellu, Minister of Works announced 58 infrastructure projects, including a new Batang Lupar Bridge, a new Kuala Tatau-Kuala Balingian road, upgrading the Mambong-Sejingkat Road (Kuching), Miri-Lutong Road (Miri), Limbang-Lawas Road and the elevated road in Miri.²³ The 2006 BN campaign relied heavily on the promise of distribution of public funds.

¹⁹ Rintos Mail, "CM slams 'parrot' opposition. *The Borneo Post*. 16 May, 2006.

²⁰ Mohd Kamel Othman. "Sarawak Govt Enhances Rural Growth Centres in 9MP" *Bernama*. 5 May 2006.

²¹ "RM150 mln boost for pepper, cocoa farmers." *The Borneo Post*. 16 May, 2006

²² Abdullah Jamin. "PKR candidates are 'political rejects': Tengah" *The Borneo Post*. 14 May, 2006

²³ "58 Infrastructural Projects for S'wak" *Bernama*, 18 May 2006.

The tie between funding and loyalty to the BN was made explicit. Speaking in Mukah, PBB leader Abdul Wahab Aziz highlighted the area's development since the discovery of coal, stressing the development was the result of the election of Taib Mahmud as the local representative. He noted that "a RM800-million power station being built in Matading, Balingian, [was] set to boost development along the Mukah coast. It has prompted the development of a 100,000-hectare oil palm plantation in the Mukah Division and the construction of a deep-sea fishing port at a cost of RM200 [US\$216] million in Tanjung Manis.... Tremendous development [occurred] only after Taib became the Balingian elected representative in the state election in 2001."²⁴ In two constituencies in particular, both dependent on new infrastructure, the tie between political loyalty and development was made clear. In Ba'Kelalan the issue was a new road, linking the area's access to towns. BN candidate Nelson Balang Rining highlighted a link between the BN and residents' future when he noted, "It is not a matter of five years if the opposition wins, but development could be stunted by as much as 15 to 20 years and we must all rally to make the highland developments take off under the Ninth Malaysia Plan. .. Only the BN can deliver our aspirations in Ba'Kelalan."²⁵ A similar road project was politicized in Bekenu.²⁶ BN government officials allegedly even went as far to as reward village leaders for their loyalty with checks given to community leaders the day before the election.

The BN also emphasized stability, arguing that the BN coalition framework protects the interests of different ethnic communities. In a campaign speech in Bakong, Taib Mahmud resounded this regular theme: "Don't vote for those who created chaos and disunity among the people who live in peace and harmony under the current BN government."²⁷ He reiterated this in Miri: "In our case, the BN is the most capable to form a stable government, and this reality should be accepted by the people. You now have a new airport, hospital, shophouses, port and hotels. If a place is not well developed, and if the BN is not united in bringing development, all these would not be available. ... They don't just happen by themselves. They all need proper planning, hard work, dedication and unity. That is why we should think deeply, and always remember who we should vote for when it comes to electing our political representatives in the coming election."²⁸ The same message of inter-ethnic security was highlighted by Information Minister Zainuddin Maidin: "Unity in Malaysia is not only among the communities but also within each community and will be better still if the people can enjoy communal unity within one party," he said.²⁹

Yet, in 2006 Sarawak the message was more than ethnic security; implicitly the BN argued that support for them was critical in maintaining Sarawak's autonomy in decision-making and having its own leaders in control. Building on Sarawakian nationalism, BN leaders suggested that a vote for the BN assured an effective voice for

²⁴ "Wave of Development Transforms Mukah Coast," *Bernama*, 11 May 2006.

²⁵ Philip Kiew. "Ensure highland devt takes off" *The Borneo Post*. 19 May, 2006

²⁶ Hilary Sebastian. "Bekenu Villagers Assured of Road by Year-End" *Bernama*, 8 May 2006

²⁷ Mohamad Abdullah. "CM: Don't vote for those who create chaos" *The Borneo Post*. 16 May, 2006

²⁸ Patrick Joseph. "Vote BN for stable government: Taib." *The Borneo Post*. 14 May, 2006

²⁹ "Bury Permanently Peninsula-based Opposition Parties, Says Zam" *Bernama*, 14 May, 2006

Sarawak among West Malaysia leaders. A vote for the opposition would create a context in which West Malaysia would leverage more control, they argued. Stability involved not only inter-ethnic harmony, but Sarawak's autonomy.³⁰

One important element underscoring all these messages was chief minister Taib Mahmud. The 2006 polls were portrayed as his last election. Not only was election day his birthday, it was an opportunity to acknowledge his contribution to the state, a theme that came out regularly in the newspaper coverage of the election as Taib's photograph was regularly featured. One headline was explicit – "Give CM special birthday gift."³¹

In contrast, the opposition parties emphasized the need to have a voice to check possible abuses in government, yet each stressed a particular theme. SNAP relied heavily on the issue of native customary land (NCR), arguing that the BN state government was disempowering the Dayak community in its development program. Its alliance within the BBS rubric aimed to make it more viable as a multi-ethnic opposition, yet its campaigning on the ground centered around personalities, including long-time leader among the Dayaks, Daniel Tajem, who campaigned (unsuccessfully) in Balai Ringin. Their ties within BBS assured more access to funds for campaigning and more consistency in the opposition message.

Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) emphasized the need for alternative governance, whether it was through less corruption, human rights protection, high inflation or more equitable allocation of resources. PKR advisor, former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim visited Sarawak for three days and campaigned, highlighting a range of issues under this broad umbrella. One key theme that tapped into the concerns of Sarawakians was the size of the oil royalty, which was deemed to not be adequately representative for the state, especially in light of the recent fuel prices. PKR picked selectively from a series of issues, rather than providing a consistent message and relied heavily on machinery and resources from West Malaysia for support in local campaigning. The two main local concerns were price hikes, especially the removal of fuel subsidies, and the uncertainty and possible burden for residents in urban areas associated with the end of the 60-year land lease. Urban residents were concerned about lease renewal and the cost of the new rent. PAS emphasized similar issues, although placed their concerns within the rubric of proper Islamic governance. Their focus on one constituency allowed for a more concentrated campaign. Yet the local PAS candidate was not seen to be close to the party, having contested in other races under a different party banner, and thus did not draw the same level of support from the party leadership as early PAS contests in Sarawak in 1999 and 2001.

Among the opposition, the DAP had the strongest campaign. Their manifesto carried the theme "Enough is Enough" and "Sarawak Deserves Better", as they used a Taiwan-style of campaigning that promoted their candidates as dynamic alternatives and a united team. They portrayed themselves as a necessary watchdog on the BN government, especially for Chinese voters, and stressed their record in the state

³⁰ "BN has power, ability to deliver." *The Borneo Post*. 16 May, 2006

³¹ "Give CM Special Birthday Gift." *The Borneo Post* 14 May, 2006.

opposition. The issue of price hikes, the land lease and corruption were all highlighted, but these were couched in an emphasis on the need for an effective check on development and broader representation, especially for Chinese voters.

Campaigning was fierce. The BN responded to opposition issues, as in the case in Sibul where it approved in principle the application of 835 owners to extend their titles and in Kuching where 87 land titles were in principle renewed.³² These “approvals”, whoever, were conditional on the Land and Survey Department final review and payment, for which the amount was not specified during the campaign. In calling the opposition “liars,” “West Malaysia opportunists” or “rejects”, the government both adamantly denied that they were seizing land and harped on the ineffectiveness of opposition parties.³³ There was a special focus in BN attacks on Keadilan and PAS, yet even the DAP was labeled “Dangerous and Poisonous.” BN supporters even used personal attacks when the *Eastern Times* featured a picture of a group of transvestites welcoming Anwar Ibrahim to the state at the Kuching airport. The opposition candidates lashed back and traded their own insults during campaigning, saying that “BN” stood for *Barang Naik* or “Goods Increase” in reference to inflation and by attacking the character of the chief minister. The level of campaigning varied across the state, with the most dynamic campaigning happening in Kuching, which featured the largest public meeting at Kings Center Shopping Plaza the night before the election, with over 5,000 voters.

Polling Day and Election Results:

On May 20, 62.6% of the electorate in Sarawak went to the polls, a four percent decline from the 2001 elections. The EC was expected to spend RM31 million on the election, up from RM9.5 in the 2001 polls and reported that it would make use of 20 helicopters, 3,889 land vehicles, 1,007 boats and 48 speedboats to reach the 1,705 polling centres staffed with 14,571 officers, 71 returning officers and 170 assistant returning officers.³⁴ Voters in rural constituencies voted early, with polling effectively ending by noon in the remote constituencies of Ba’Kelalan and Telung Usan. Some polling stations were only open for half an hour. Polling stations were staffed by polling agents from contesting political parties of all sides, with greater representation and checks on the process in urban constituencies involving DAP, SNAP and Keadilan. The Malaysian police force was stationed at all polling stations, and professionally maintained order, with over 10,000 officers especially called in to the oversea the polls. There were no incidents of violence reported, as the campaign and polling day were peaceful.

By the end of the day, Sarawak had a new legislature. Results poured in from 8pm, with the overall results known by midnight. The BN had lost nine seats, eight to the opposition and another to an independent. Twenty-one candidates had lost their deposits, mostly independents. As Table 7 shows, the party that lost the most seats was the SUPP and the greatest gains were made by the DAP. Most of the victories were concentrated in

³² Danny Wong, “Expiring land leases extended,” *The Borneo Post*. 16 May, 2006 and “87 Land Titles Renewed,” *The Borneo Post*. 16 May, 2006

³³ “Government does not seize land” *The Borneo Post*. 17 May, 2006

³⁴ “Elections Commission to Spend RM31 mln for Next Sarawak Election,” *Bernama*, 15 March, 2006.

urban areas. With one exception in which a strong BN incumbent stayed in office, the BN lost all the seats in Kuching town.

Table 7: Sarawak 2006 Election Results Seats by Party

<i>Party</i>	<i>Seats Won</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>BN</i>	<i>62/71</i>	<i>87%</i>
PBB	35/35	100%
SUPP	11/19	58%
SPDP	8/8	100%
PRS	8/9	89%
<i>Opposition*</i>	<i>8/71</i>	<i>11.3%</i>
DAP	6/12	50%
SNAP	1/28	3.4%
PKR	1/25	4%
<i>Independents</i>	<i>1/21</i>	<i>4.7%</i>

The BN lost popular vote, as shown in Table 8. The BN had been on a steady decline in support from its high in 2001 of 70.3%, and only managed to secure 62.8% in 2006, a strong majority yet a drop from earlier elections. The DAP, for the first time ever, was able to win a majority (although slim) of votes in the seats it contested. Both PKR and SNAP picked up support, although neither reached a third of voters. PAS in its single seat improved its performance, picking up 400 votes.

Table 8: Sarawak 2006 Election Results Popular Vote in Seats Contested

<i>Party</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2006</i>
BN	70.3%	65.0%	62.8%
DAP	28.1%	40.7%	50.1%
PKR	22.2%	19.2%	25.8%
SNAP	--	24.7%	29.3%

The opposition made gains across the board in this incumbent dominated state, showing that through hard work and a calculated strategy gains by the opposition are possible, even in an uneven electoral terrain.

In-depth Study of Election Results

For most analysts, the victory was portrayed as a loss of BN support from the Chinese and from urban constituencies. An analysis of local voting patterns, using polling station data suggests that the losses for the BN were broader and involved a variety of factors. First of all, the gains for the opposition were across the board along ethnic lines as it experienced a multi-ethnic swing in its favor. Based on a comparison with the 2001 polls shown in Table 9, there were drops in support for the BN in Chinese, Iban, mixed and Malay seats. The drop was the most precipitous in Chinese seats, however. These

* The SNAP candidate subsequently left his party and joined the BN under the rubric of the SPDP.

constituencies initially also had the lowest support for the BN. It is thus not surprising that the decline in support for the BN was reflected in these seats.

Table 9: Sarawak 2006 Results Ethnic Voting Patterns

Share of BN Votes	2001	2004	2006	Difference 2001 to 2006
Malay	75.5%	81.4%	74.2%	Drop 1.3%
Chinese	66.4%	57.0%	49.0%	Drop 17.4%
Iban	70.1%	61.3%	63.8%	Drop 6.3%
Bidayuh	66.0%	75.1%	68.8%	Add 2.8%
Orang Ulu	57.8%	NA	57.6%	Drop 0.02%
Mixed	71.3%	67.2%	66.7%	Drop 4.6%

A look at polling station results in two seats Bukit Assek and Dudong, detailed below in Tables 10 & 11, show that this pattern of a multi-ethnic swing was replicated within constituencies. In both DAP seats, one finds that in Iban communities, the swing toward the BN is larger than that in Chinese areas. This suggests that with viable candidates, voters may move outside of the pattern of ethnic mobilization and vote for the opposition, even opposition candidates from a different ethnic origin than the voters in an area.

By drawing attention to local areas, one finds that patterns of voting do not necessarily fall exclusively along ethnic lines and that the swing was more substantial than simply Chinese voters abandoning the BN. It is important to note, however, that the swing toward the opposition was not evident and consistent across all seats, especially in dominant (over 80%) Iban and Malay constituencies.

Table 10: Electoral Voting Patterns by Polling Station – N39 Bukit Assek

Polling #	Polling Station	2004			2006			2004 vs. 2006		
		BN%	Chinese %	Iban %	BN%	Chinese	Iban	BN%	Chinese	Iban
210/39/01	TIONG HUA	45.9%	44.5%	78.2%	34.9%	34.2%	59.3%	-11.0%	-10.3%	-18.9%
210/39/02	TONG SANG	46.6%	45.4%	80.1%	34.8%	34.0%	58.5%	-11.8%	-11.5%	-21.5%
210/39/03	KELADI	63.9%	47.9%	81.8%	49.1%	35.2%	63.7%	-14.7%	-12.7%	-18.1%
210/39/04	KAPOR LIMA	49.2%	46.8%	78.0%	30.1%	28.2%	57.0%	-19.2%	-18.6%	-20.9%
210/39/05	LEMBANGAN	47.8%	46.0%	78.3%	33.6%	32.6%	58.3%	-14.2%	-13.4%	-20.1%
210/39/06	UK DAIK	50.8%	50.0%	83.0%	33.0%	32.3%	58.1%	-17.8%	-17.7%	-25.0%
	Average	50.7%	46.7%	79.9%	35.9%	32.7%	59.1%	-14.8%	-14.0%	-20.8%

Table 11: Electoral Voting Patterns by Polling Station – N40 Dudong

Polling #	Polling Station	2004			2006			2004 vs. 2006		
		BN%	Chinese %	Iban %	BN%	Chinese	Iban	BN%	Chinese	Iban
210/40/01	ASSAN	76.5%	47.6%	85.7%	54.2%	32.9%	61.1%	-22.3%	-14.7%	-24.7%
210/40/02	NAMAN	74.9%	47.2%	75.8%	52.5%	32.2%	53.1%	-22.4%	-15.0%	-22.6%
210/40/03	PAK	77.7%	49.2%	96.2%	56.1%	37.2%	70.4%	-21.7%	-12.0%	-25.8%
210/40/04	DUDONG	59.2%	46.8%	70.5%	43.2%	31.6%	55.1%	-16.0%	-15.2%	-15.4%
210/40/05	SALIM- Bukit Lima	61.9%	48.4%	92.3%	35.6%	31.9%	58.6%	-26.3%	-16.6%	-33.7%
210/40/06	LANANG	55.0%	51.4%	86.9%	42.1%	40.7%	62.1%	-12.9%	-10.8%	-24.8%
210/40/07	AIK DEE	49.2%	47.7%	81.3%	36.9%	36.1%	59.7%	-12.3%	-11.6%	-21.6%
210/40/08	MENYAN	68.7%	47.3%	71.3%	50.0%	32.9%	52.3%	-18.7%	-14.4%	-19.1%
210/40/09	SIBU JAYA	78.1%	47.1%	85.9%	55.4%	32.9%	60.2%	-22.7%	-14.2%	-25.7%
	Average	66.8%	48.1%	82.9%	47.3%	34.3%	59.2%	-19.5%	-13.8%	-23.7%

A look at the local data also shows an increasing divide among younger and older voters, with younger voters in the 2006 election more inclined to support the opposition. This pattern was extremely evident in DAP seats, where the divide was an average of 11%. Table 12 provides a sample of these seats; in Kota Sentosa and Pending, both seats offering young opposition lawyers against older incumbents, the divide was especially sharp. This pattern points to changes across generations within Sarawak that favors the opposition if this momentum continues.

Table 12: Share of BN Support Among Older and Younger Voters

Seats	Older Voters	Younger Voters	Difference
Bukit Assek	41.5%	31.9%	9.6 favor opposition
Kota Sentosa	51.7%	32.8%	18.9% favor opposition
Pending	51.2%	29.9%	21.3% favor opposition
Batu Kawah	75.0%	66.0%	9% favor opposition

A third lens through which to understand the voting patterns in Sarawak is class. Below is a descriptive outline of voting patterns in Sarawak across different classes, based on an income/class assessment of different polling stations and a share of the results in each election.³⁵ One finds that the BN has much stronger support among lower class voters, those that make less than RM1000 (US\$ 270) a month, and less support among wealthier voters. In 2006, the opposition managed to win a majority of middle

³⁵ The class measurement is based on interviews with candidates and residents from a local community and should be seen as an indicator of voting in areas with people of different class backgrounds. The share of results varies across elections, since the data was provided by individual candidates. The 2006 results is based on 44% of the state results at the local level.

class voters. The variation across class points to the fact that different messages and patterns of mobilizing voters has an impact, with the BN more effective in using its development approach among poorer voters.

Table 12: Class Voting in Sarawak: Preliminary Assessment Share of BN Support in Classified Polling Districts³⁶

Class	2006	2004	2001	1999
Upper	46%	48%	57%	n/a
Upper Middle	37%	45%	55%	57%
Middle	45%	55%	69%	59%
Lower Middle	52%	58%	71%	59%
Lower	70%	68%	72%	65%

No Simple Answer: Explaining the electoral results

Sarawak’s election results were to all observers a surprise, in that the opposition picked up more seats than expected.³⁷ Yet, they were more complex than initial analyses suggest. To understand these results, it is essential to go beyond the campaign issues and understand what underlying factors were shaping the behavior of Sarawakian voters.

Sarawak was a bell-weather nationally, although in a limited sense. Abdullah Badawi did not campaign in this election, since he was traveling in the Middle East at the time, and left the stewardship of the BN to deputy prime minister Najib Razak, and Minister of Education Hishammuddin Onn. Both men did not galvanize voters and lacked a coherent platform beyond the “developmentalist” agenda outlined earlier. Yet, even if Abdullah had campaigned in Sarawak, the BN coattails were not as encompassing as they had been in 2004, when his first election as prime minister picked up considerable support. There were a number of specific reasons that Abdullah and the BN as a whole did not have the same level of support, including the increase in fuel prices and high electricity tariffs as well as a slowing of reform. The most important factor was a perceived decline in the economy, as the investment climate has slowed, inflation increased and the local engines of local growth became less clear. Sarawakians, especially those in the urban areas, raised concerns about the current national leadership and its lack of direction.

One positive impact of Abdullah’s administration, however, was a more open media, especially the Chinese media. *Sin Chew Daily*, for example, covered both the BN and opposition candidates, and the issues raised at a variety of local meetings, informing voters to a degree not previously experienced in recent elections. Even the coverage in

³⁶ The sample size of each of these categories varied from 1 polling station as was the case for upper class areas (over RM6000 income) to 62 polling districts for lower class areas, under RM1000.

³⁷ For analyses immediately after the elections see S.C. Chan “Winds of Change,” *Malaysian Business*, 1 June 2006; Francis Paul, “When the Chinese decide to Defeat the BN,” May 20, 2006 <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/51336>,” “Political Tsunami in Sarawak” in *Aliran* July 2006. <http://www.aliran.com/content/view/108/10/>; Bridget Welsh and Ong Kian Ming, “Sarawak at the Crossroads” May 26, 2006 <http://www.malaysiakini.com/opinions/features/51568>,

The Borneo Post featured opposition candidates and issues. The greater access to information had an impact on the election, particularly boosting the performance of the opposition.

Yet the main concerns of voters were local, focused on issues within Sarawak. There was no question that the 2006 election was a referendum on the leadership of Taib Mahmud, who turned 70 on election day. Known colloquially as “Pek Mo” or “White Hair”, Taib Mahmud’s 25-year tenure in office raised serious concerns among voters. The issue was not only a matter of the length of his service, but the total control he has managed to exert over political power in the state and the economy through firms alleged linked to his family and his distribution of state contracts.

For many Chinese voters, there were also real concerns about the effectiveness of the SUPP as their voice within the BN. Cabinet reshuffles in the year before the election has demoted SUPP president George Chan, and reduced his influence in policy, specifically the state’s finances. Chan is connected to Taib’s family through marriage, and thus some questioned his loyalty. The SUPP was not seen as protecting the interests of local Chinese business. For some, their concerns were accentuated by the perception that land leases, now mainly involving palm oil, were no longer given to local Sarawakian Chinese, but Chinese from West Malaysia. The SUPP, through leases allocated to representatives close to the Chan family, was seen to be benefiting from this trend and failing to distribute benefits among the Chinese Sarawakian community as a whole. The high factionalism within the SUPP, tied to regional power bases in which Kuching in particular was seen to be disadvantaged over Miri and Sibü, contributed to infighting, which in some instances led to the sabotage of SUPP candidates. Some voters questioned the direction of SUPP, which had a tradition of Sarawak nationalism and was had an earlier leftist tradition compared to other parties. The party had long focused on the need for distribution of benefits and poverty-reduction, yet the funds allocated to the refurbished headquarters in Sibü and scandals associated with party officials involved in personal financial gains symbolized in the luxury home of SUPP leader Wong Soon Koh in Sibü or through corruption charges associated with the Tabuan Laru project (involving development contracts) raised hackles. Others were less inclined to blame SUPP directly, blaming Taib for marginalizing the party and saying this was an intentional plan to weaken the party and maintain his own control.

For other voters it was not merely about SUPP, but the direction of the Sarawak BN. Taib’s leadership has devoted extensive resources to building the infrastructure of the state, its “hardware”, but did little to build the human resources, its “software.” In places like Sibü and other remote areas of the state, there are high levels of out-migration, especially of younger people, who cannot find employment or educational opportunities in these areas. They have the roads, yet cannot afford to buy the cars to drive on them. The underlying issue of the economy was closely related to the allocation of construction jobs and limited employment opportunities was seen as part of Taib’s management, accentuating these concerns.

For some Sarawakians, the 2006 campaign raised concerns about Sarawak's position within Malaysia, reflecting a resurgence of Sarawak nationalism. Both the BN and opposition used this theme, with the BN winning overall. Its message of needed autonomy won over more voters than a concern about the oil royalty, yet both reached voters effectively.

For other voters, the issues revolved around the candidates themselves. Sarawak remains highly parochial, and its distance from the peninsula reinforces an attention to local personalities. The campaigning style and personal qualities of candidates influenced voters, who were hesitant to move away from incumbents. DAP's united and gender diverse team in Kuching was more effective than its team in Sibu which was less cohesive. The younger profile of the DAP candidates, averaging 40 years old, was seen as more dynamic than the SUPP alternatives, who averaged 56 years old. The prominence of Keadilan's Dominic Ng in the Sarawak legal community and long history in politics added to his profile, advantaging him over his colleagues in Keadilan. He was allocated the most competitive seat in his party.

The variation among voters and the results themselves, suggest the need to avoid oversimplifying the outcome. Success involved a multiplicity of factors and strategies, which will likely continue as voters respond to different political concerns with greater sophistication.

Electoral Irregularities and Concerns

In assessing the 2006 Sarawak election, it is also important to highlight the continued areas of concerns in the electoral process. Many of these have been brought to the public through MAFREL's active electoral observation and political parties. Here I draw attention to five of the most serious ongoing problems.

In Sarawak, the 2006 election highlighted the ongoing problem of electoral financing. The use of vote-buying, reported in police reports during the election in three constituencies, Opar, Saribas and Balai Ringin³⁸ and protested by the DAP in the case of postal voting³⁹ undermines the electoral process and unfairly advantages the incumbent government. From betting to cash disbursement, this practice remains an open secret that undermines the process.

The use of state machinery for campaigning only exacerbates these inequalities. When state vehicles and public officials are expected and rewarded for delivering the BN vote, this entrenches an uneven electoral terrain that makes the process less legitimate. This is accentuated by a media that is expected to serve the government, rather than the people, and curtailed if it deviates too far from this norm. Ironically, as these practices have become more institutionalized, the costs of elections have increased with the greater demand.

³⁸ Police reports were filed in: N.1 Opar (May 16th), N. 30 Saribas (May 20th), N21 Balai Ringin (May 20th) according to the MAFREL preliminary report, 6 August, 2006.

³⁹ "Postal Votes for Sale, DAP alleges" *The Borneo Post*. 18 May, 2006

The ongoing concerns about the fair administration of elections centers around the Electoral Commission. MAFREL's preliminary report based on 14 constituencies highlighted the high level of discrepancies in the electoral roll. Many voters were listed without addresses. For example, in the area of Sibu 71.41% of the electors did not have reported addresses. MAFREL raised these concerns throughout the campaign. One of the highlights of their effort was a picture featured in *The Borneo Post* of the grave of a registered voter in Sibu.⁴⁰ MAFREL also recorded one case of voter impersonation.⁴¹ The perception of bias within the system and failure to clean the roll effectively raises serious questions about electoral outcomes in close contests especially.

Sarawak's low voter turnout points to the problems of voter registration in this largely rural state. The number of registered voters is considerably lower than population numbers on the census, even factoring in demographic shifts. The mobility of Sarawak voters, who often work outside of the state, is also an obstacle. Voters are required to return home to vote, and many cannot afford to do so. This raises the question of the need to reform the postal voter system and improve the voter registration effort.

Sarawak's 2006 election also shows that information does matter. A more open media in the urban areas did affect voting and enriched the campaign. The back and forth over issues in the press made for a more robust discussion and healthy debate. Overall this benefited the opposition, yet this was less a product of the openness of the media but more a product of the lackluster responses of BN candidates who relied on old messages rather than new solutions. Maintaining and broadening information flow in a more balanced media will remain a key concern for future elections.

Lessons and Reflections:

In the wake of the May election, both the opposition and BN have adjusted. The opposition has used this victory to build momentum for the next general election, with DAP the most optimistic about its fortunes. The message of no-three corner fights among opposition parties has had an effect. Keadilan similarly is building support, since with its one victory its representation in government effectively doubled. SNAP has been hard hit by the defection of its winning candidate back into the BN fold and remains less enthusiastic about its future. The lessons of diverse campaign messages, dynamic campaigns, strong candidates and cooperation have hit home, with varied intensity.

For the BN, the blame of the losses has mainly centered on Taib, the SUPP or infighting. Taib will likely not be a factor in a next election, as he is expected to retire. The key issue will be who replaces him as chief minister and whether this person will be able to maintain unity within the BN as well as govern effectively. The SUPP has faced a devastating defeat, which has been exacerbated as they have been excluded from the spoils of office, including losing the mayoralty of Kuching South, usually a political

⁴⁰ *The Borneo Post*, 13 May, 2006.

⁴¹ N.11 Batu Lintang involved Then Siew Chin who filed a police report on May 20th MAFREL preliminary report, 6 August, 2006.

appointee, in late September. It has yet to regroup politically. The SUPP's losses have served as a warning call for other Chinese-based parties in the BN, which have become more anxious and politically mobilized after the May polls in their hopes to avoid a parallel pattern in the next parliamentary election. Infighting within BN parties has continued, especially in the PRS, which has faced a serious leadership struggle after the May polls. The BN has remained focused internally within parties, rather than making an assessment overall of the need for changes. With a strong margin of victory, they have less need to take stock.

Yet, all the political parties in Malaysia face serious obstacles in the near future, as does the electoral process as a whole. The opposition parties have developed a stronger foundation, but have yet to establish the organizational framework to support a strong base for political mobilization. The only exception is the DAP, which is limited to contesting in a few seats, and PAS, which is concentrating its efforts in West Malaysia. The Sarawak opposition, especially those under the BBS banner, need to regroup and build up local candidates. These candidates must appeal to younger voters, come from a variety of backgrounds and include women. The BN has to think seriously about developing new messages beyond development, as it faces more sophisticated voters. It is relying on ethnic divisions and the state for support, which while a strong foundation, do not allow these parties to grow and develop new forms of representation for younger voters. Chinese BN parties in particular need to rejuvenate, although this process is not exclusive to these parties. In Sarawak, leadership divisions, driven by personal ambitions, have undermined the quality and effectiveness of institutions. It is vital that national leaders curb these efforts, rather than accentuate them, which has been the case to date in Sarawak.

Of the contenders in the election, the opposition is more willing to adjust, and as such the Sarawak 2006 polls shows promise for future gains within the state and elsewhere in Malaysia. These gains will likely remain limited. A fundamental political opening will involve not only changes in the system via pressures for electoral reform but a willingness to reform within all political parties in Malaysia as a whole.

Selected References:

Aeria, Andrew. 1996. "Winds of Change: An Analysis of the 1996 Sarawak State Elections" *Aliran Monthly*. 16/9: 33-40.

1997a. "The Politics of Development and the 1996 Sarawak: State Elections," In Francis Loh Kok Wah (Ed) *Sabah and Sarawak: The Politics of Development and Federalism. Kajian Malaysia* Special Issue. 15: 1/2 (June/December): 57-83.

1997b. "Election Bribery Exposed. Courts Find Evidence of Voter-Buying," in *Aliran Monthly*, 17(1):2-7.

2002. "Politics, Business, the State and Development in Sarawak, 1970-2000." Ph.D. Thesis. University of London.

2003. "Elections and the Electoral System in Sarawak," Paper presented at the IKMAS Workshop to Finalize Research on the Electoral System in Malaysia, (January)

Chin, James. 1996. "PBDS and Ethnicity in Sarawak Politics." *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. 26/4: 512-26.

1997. "Politics of Federal Intervention in Malaysia: With Reference to Kelantan, Sarawak and Sabah," *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 33:96-120.

2003. "The Melanau-Malay Schism Erupts Again: Sarawak at the Polls" in Lok Kok Wah & Johan Saravanamuttu (eds.), *New Politics in Malaysia* (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies,) pp. 213-227.

2004. "Relative Autonomy: Politics in Sarawak under Mahathir," in Bridget Welsh (ed.) *Reflections: The Mahathir Years*. Washington, D.C.: Southeast Asia Studies, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS

2004. "Sabah and Sarawak: The More Things Change, The More They Remain The Same", in Chin Kin Wah & D. Singh (eds.) *South East Asian Affairs 2004* (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies)

Chin Ung-Ho (James). 1997. *Chinese Politics in Sarawak: A Study of the Sarawak United People's Party*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Colchester, M. 1989. *Pirates, Squatters and Poachers: The Political Ecology of Dispossession of the Native Peoples' of Sarawak*. London: Survival International & Institute of Social Analysis.

Goldman, Michael. 1997. "Contemporary Chinese Politics in Sarawak: A View from Kuching and Sibul," *Kajian Malaysia*. 15/1-2: 84-147.

Gomez, Edmund Terence. 2004. "Politics of the Media Business," in Bridget Welsh (ed.), *Reflections: The Mahathir Years*. Washington, D.C.: Southeast Asia Studies, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS

Khoo Kay Jin and Andrew Aeria. 2002. "Elections and the Electoral Commission in Sarawak." Paper presented at IKMAS workshop on the Electoral System in Malaysia (August)

Jawan, Jayum A. 1993. *The Iban Factor in Sarawak Politics*. Serdang: Penerbit Universiti Pertanian Malaysia.

Leigh, Michael. 1974. *The Rising Moon: Political Change in Sarawak*. Sydney: Sydney University Press.

1991. "Money Politics and Dayak Nationalism," in Muhammad Ikmal Said and J. Saravanamuttu (eds.) *Images of Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia, pp. 180-202.

2002. "Sarawak 2001 Elections," Unpublished.

Lim Hong Hai. (1997) "The Malaysian Electoral System: Its Formation and Change." Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

Loh, Francis. 1997. *Sabah and Sarawak: The Politics of Development and Federalism*. Special Issue. *Kajian Malaysia*. 15 (1 & 2)

Maid-Cooke, F. 1997. "The Politics of 'Sustainability' in Sarawak," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. 27/2: 217-241.

Mason, Richard. 1995. "Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak and the Sarawak State Elections of 1987 and 1991." In *Kajian Malaysia XIII/1* (June): pp. 26-58.

Milne, R.S. 1973. "Patrons, Clients and Ethnicity: The Case of Sarawak and Sabah in Malaysia," *Asian Survey* 13: 891-907.

Mustafa K. Anuar. 2004. "Muzzled? The Media in Mahathir's Malaysia," in Bridget Welsh (ed.) *Reflections: The Mahathir Years*. Washington, D.C.: Southeast Asia Studies, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS

Ngidang, D. 1995. "The Politics of Development in Longhouse Communities in Sarawak," *Development in Practice*. 5/4 (November): 305-312.

Puthuchery, Mavis and Noraini Othman. (eds.) 2005. *Elections and Democracy in Malaysia*. Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Press.

Puyok, Arnold. 2005. "The 2004 Ba'Kelalan By-election in Sarawak, East Malaysia: The Lun Bawang Factor and Whither Representative Democracy in Malaysia" *Contemporary Southeast Asia*. 27/1: 67-79.

Roff, Margaret. 1974. *The Politics of Belonging: Political Change in Sabah and Sarawak*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Searle, Peter. 1983. *Politics in Sarawak, 1970-1976: The Iban Perspective*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.