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## **Sarawak Regionalism: Not the Only Driving Force for Voters in GE15**

*By Sylvia Koh*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Sarawak regionalism has been on the rise. This has been a challenge for Pakatan Harapan, the main national opposition coalition in the state. Yet Pakatan has done better than expected in Sarawak during Malaysia's recent general election, suggesting other factors at work for voters.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Sarawak regionalism – the privileging of the state's rights to autonomy over other state issues – has been on the rise. This has allowed local parties promoting regionalist agendas to win more seats in the state assembly and parliament.

Malaysia's 15<sup>th</sup> General Election (GE15) seems to have reinforced this trend, as the state's long-ruling coalition, Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), gained 23 seats (up from 19), forming the third biggest coalition in Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's unity government. The coalition, which already dominates the state assembly, won on a "Sarawak First" platform.

Rising regionalism has been a challenge for Pakatan Harapan (PH), the main national opposition coalition in Sarawak comprising Democratic Action Party (DAP), People's Justice Party (PKR), and Amanah. Its first term in federal government (2018-2020) failed to deliver on autonomy-related promises, casting doubts over a national coalition's ability to champion Sarawak's rights. This contributed to PH's heavy defeat in 2021's state election, with votes swinging to GPS and other local parties pushing regionalist agendas.

Yet, PH did better than expected in GE15 with six parliamentary seats, albeit down from seven prior to dissolution. The DAP, PH's strongest party in Sarawak, delivered five seats in largely urban Chinese constituencies. PKR delivered one.

Instead of focusing on state rights, PH candidates in Sarawak campaigned on issues of national leadership, which appeared to resonate with DAP's Chinese voters.

### **Distrust of the Peninsula and Federal Power**

Sarawak, along with Sabah, hold special rights within the Malaysian Federation as both were equal partners with Malaya at the formation of the nation. The terms of these rights and partnership were set out in the Malaysia Agreement of 1963 (MA63).

The current quest to restore Sarawak's autonomy stems from the gradual erosion of its special rights under decades of dominant rule by Barisan Nasional (BN), which consolidated power to the central government.

Distrust of BN in Sarawak is also underscored by anxieties over BN's lead party United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) pushing racial politics in Sarawak. While Sarawak's parties are largely ethnic-based, ethnic politics has not featured as overtly in the state as in peninsular Malaysia.

### **PH/DAP's Anti-BN Platform in Sarawak**

Sarawak's political landscape mostly consists of local parties. BN parties, including UMNO, are absent from the state. Previously, BN in Sarawak had been represented by its local chapter, formed mainly by Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP), Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS), Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), with others having come and gone. These remaining four parties left BN and formed GPS following BN's defeat in GE14 in 2018.

Despite the dominance of this local coalition led by PBB, DAP has been able to steadily build up strongholds in urban Chinese constituencies since the 1990s, winning seats in both state and parliamentary elections.

At the state level, DAP could provide some oversight over state resource distributions given that Sarawak BN was mired in corruption allegations under the leadership of the widely unpopular Taib Mahmud, who ruled as Sarawak's Chief Minister (CM) for 33 years (1981-2014).

At the federal level, DAP had over the years established itself as a check on BN, especially against corruption. This anti-BN strategy effectively focused Sarawakians' political frustrations towards Sarawak BN. PH has retained this strategy against GPS post-2018 as the latter remains BN-friendly.

### **Rise of Regionalism and PH's Decline in the State Assembly**

Sarawak BN led by PBB shifted towards regionalism after Adenan Satem replaced Taib as Chief Minister in 2014. The coalition had been losing votes, and Adenan pivoted to a populist strategy that sought to distance the coalition from BN at the

federal level and brush off its corrupt image. This shift away from BN coincided with a weakened UMNO reliant on the Sarawak coalition to keep power at the centre. Regionalism has been GPS' key electoral platform up to the present, with other local parties following suit.

This strategy proved effective, bringing the GPS coalition a larger seat share in the 2016 state election with 72 out of 82 seats (up from 55 out of 71 seats previously).

PH, however, has faced constraints in advocating Sarawak's rights. While it had made several promises to restore MA63 prior to the 2018 general election, including [greater gas revenues](#), the first PH government failed to deliver them before its collapse in 2020. This helped GPS and other local parties to fan Sarawakians' [distrust](#) of PH's national allegiance and priorities.

Leading up to 2021's state election, PH's strategy again highlighted GPS' ties to BN, claiming that both GPS and BN had "[sabotaged](#)" the PH government's proposed bill to recognise the Borneo states as equal partners to West Malaysia in 2019. This narrative did not seem effective, perhaps because GPS had earned much goodwill in Sarawak through its recent successes in negotiating autonomy-related concessions with the Perikatan Nasional government that it was a part of and in managing the Covid-19 pandemic.

The 2021 state election saw the impact of rising regionalism, with votes swinging away from PH/DAP to local parties advocating Sarawak's rights. DAP was only able to clinch two state seats, down from seven, delivering PH's total as PKR and Amanah did not win any seats.

Crucially, DAP lost its seats to Chinese party SUPP, part of the ruling GPS coalition, suggesting that [concerns over local development](#) also played a part.

### **PH's Survival in GE15**

The same regionalist momentum that crushed PH in the 2021 state election appeared more subdued in GE15. PH mostly retained its number of parliamentary seats due to the Chinese vote.

A few factors could explain PH's survival. First, the coalition's anti-BN/GPS narrative was effective as it capitalised on the unpopularity of BN chairman Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who faces corruption charges, and implicated GPS with banners touting "If GPS wins, Zahid will be happy".

Second, unlike in the 2021 state election where concerns were more local, PH's anti-BN messaging on national leadership resonated in the general election. Malaysia had seen multiple changes in government since 2020. Uncertainties about the electoral outcome, and with BN appearing to have gained momentum in winning the Melaka and Johor state elections, may have revived anti-BN sentiments in Sarawak.

Third, Sarawakian Chinese voters have a [history of voting differently](#) in state and general elections, supporting SUPP at the state level where resource allocations matter while voting for PH as a federal opposition.

While growing regionalist sentiments influenced the Chinese vote swing away from DAP to SUPP and other local parties in the 2021 state election, PH's results in GE15 suggest that Chinese voters prioritised national leadership in the general election, indicating their preference for a PH-led government or at least for a check on BN and GPS in parliament. That GPS is already dominant in the state assembly to assert Sarawak's rights may also have made regional concerns less salient in GE15.

## **Conclusion**

Rising regionalism has been a challenge for PH at the state level, but appears less important in GE15, given Malaysia's increasingly unpredictable political landscape.

However, the post-election formation of the unity government has brought PH, BN and GPS into partnership, complicating the picture moving forward.

An anti-BN strategy has not always been fool proof for PH in Sarawak and may now prove less convincing in future elections. Furthermore, BN/UMNO is no longer a dominant federal power and is unlikely to regain its former position.

PH's future strategy in Sarawak would depend on the Anwar-led unity government delivering its MA63 promises, which Anwar himself made during the GE15 campaign. While GPS has an incentive to work with PH in this effort, challenges remain as GPS and PH have been competitors in Sarawak. PH's potential to lay claim to future autonomy concessions from the federal government may also dampen GPS' "Sarawak First" competitive edge.

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*Sylvia Koh is a Senior Analyst at the Malaysia Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.*

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**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: [rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg) | W: [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)