

Electoral Behavior in Sarawak: The Lun Bawang and Issue-Voting

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Abstract

This study aims to determine Lun Bawang voters' opinion on issues that would influence their vote in Bakelalan (N.81), Sarawak. A survey was conducted in the village of Kampung Puneng Berayong, located in the Lawas P.222 parliamentary constituent. A five-point Likert scale questionnaire was distributed to 250 Lun Bawang voters. The questionnaire highlighted key issues on development, NCR land, and good governance. It is assumed that rural voters tend to vote based on the rational choice approach which meant they would consider what benefits could be gained by supporting a particular candidate or political party. It was found that local electoral issues such as development and native customary rights (NCR) land were more favored compared to national issues on corruption such the IMDB case.

Keywords: rural voter behaviour, Lun Bawang, Ba' Kelalan, rational choice approach, Sarawak electoral

INTRODUCTION

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Sarawak, the largest state in Malaysia is known for its variety of ethnic groups and cultures. At the same time, it is one of the most underdeveloped states in the country, particularly the rural areas. The sheer size of its territory poses as an impediment for development, both economically and socially. Bakelalan is no exception to this.

Bakelalan (N.81) is a state constituent located in the Lawas (P.222) district, in the North Eastern part of Sarawak. Lawas is 1200 km from the state capital, Kuching and 200 km from the city of Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Due to its geographical location, the district of Lawas is more easily accessible via Sabah while travelling from its home state would require travel through Brunei. Bakelalan, located in the highlands of Lawas, is only accessible via an old logging trail suitable for four-wheel drives. This 125 km trail goes through about 20 villages and would take at least six hours to reach. In

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Bakelalan itself, nine villages are connected by walking trails, predominantly inhabited by the Lun Bawang ethnic group.

In the 2011 Sarawak State Election (SSE 2011), the Bakelalan (N.81) seat was won by opposition party Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) Baru Bian who defeated his nephew Willie Liau of the then Sarawak Barisan Nasional (SBN) by a slim 473 majority (EC 2011). Bian continued to retain his seat during the 2016 Sarawak State election (SSE 2016) with a bigger majority² (New Strait Times, 2016). The win was largely attributed to the controversy over the seizures of bibles using the word “Allah” by the Barisan Nasional (BN) federal government. Needless to say the opposition made full use of that to paint religious repression by the BN government during the election campaigning (BP 2014).

In addition to religious issues, native customary rights (NCR) land and development issues have always been in the forefront of political campaigning for the interiors of Sarawak to attract voters. With the change in the national political landscape and unprecedented victory of Pakatan Harapan in the 2018 general elections, it is even more imperative now that we identify the issues that could sway voters at the state level since the next state election is due by 2021³.

LITERITURE REVIEW

Rational Choice Approach

Several models or approaches have been established to explain voter behaviour, such as retrospective voting, sociological model, psychological model, and rational choice model. Franks (2009) determined that through retrospective voting, voters who are less informed and interested would adapt this method as an informational short cut that would require little effort on their part to decide who to vote for. This was vehemently proposed by Fiorina (1980) who suggested that voters would pass judgement on leaders, not policies, by looking at past performances. Meanwhile, the sociological model posits that voters are influenced by their family, friends, and general surroundings, including the media.

² It is important to note here that Bakelalan N.81 is part of Lawas P.222 that is held by Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), which was formed by four former Sarawak Barisan Nasional component parties following the massive defeat of BN in May 2018.

³ Sarawak is the only state in Malaysia that holds a separate election for its State Legislative Assembly (SLA). Meanwhile, other states dissolve their SLA upon Parliament's dissolution and elections are held for both Parliamentary and SLA seats at the same time.

In this study, the approach adopted would be the rational choice model which depicts that voting decision is based on the benefits that would be gained for supporting a specific candidate or party. Downs (1957) theorized this by comparing voters to consumers and political parties to companies. He asserted that if companies aim to maximize profit and consumers seek to maximize value for their purchase, then voters seek to maximize the value of their vote as the political parties act to maximize electoral gains obtained from their political proposals. The rationale is assumed to be that voters and political parties act directly according to their own interests. In essence, decisions made by voters and political parties are guided by self-interest and maximizing utility.

It is believed that voters tend to vote using this approach especially in the interiors of Sarawak. In fact, it has been contended many times that rural voters in Malaysia tend to vote for BN as they are able to reap the economic benefits from supporting this party (Weiss & Puyok, 2017). Welsh (2004) further pointed out that regional differences had deepened the impact of electoral outcome in Malaysia i.e. between the rural and underdeveloped Malay belt of the north, developed west coast of Peninsular Malaysia and the local concerns of Sarawak and Sabah in East Malaysia.

The role of issues plays a particular factor to voters' preference. Elections allow citizens an opportunity to indirectly influence governmental decisions. In a democracy, it is assumed that the electorate will be able to affect government policies through selecting candidates based on their stance. This is called issue voting (Denver & Hands 1990; Campbell, 1960). For example, in SSE2016 the opposition placed a lot of emphasis on issues of royalties and the hike of oil prices as well as land leases and corruption as a main source of campaign material. It was used to instil the feeling of dissatisfaction among the voters against the BN, especially Chinese voters.

In a similar study (Chai et al., 2017) conducted in Sarawak Chinese dominated area Padungan (N.9), it was found that the respondents in the city identified more with issues concerning basic facilities and high cost of living than score highest means with 4.02 and 4.00 respectively. During his tenure as chief minister, Adenan Satem had abolished tolls, reduced assessment tax rate and electricity tariffs in the state to help alleviate high cost of living in the state. The initiatives by the late chief minister were definitely a major factor for Sarawak BN's victory in SSE2016. Mohd Nizah (2016) further suggested that voters are mostly influenced by short-term factors such as issues pertaining to water supply, education, law, freedom of speech, media freedom, ethnic sentiments, religion and economic development.

Chin (2010) identified that socioeconomic issues are important electoral tools to march to victory in any election. Munira (2015) exemplified that issues on education,

social problems, economic development and the likes are often manipulated by both BN and Pakatan Harapan (PH) to illustrate both success and failures of each other. For instance, BN had constantly praised itself for their policies, projects and incentives that brought benefit to the people to convince continuous support. Rationally, this method would work especially in the interiors of Sarawak where development is severely lacking.

In a separate study by Chin and Puyok (2010), it was argued that national issues which are dominated in West Malaysian media and politicians (GST, the Anwar factor, misappropriation of 1MDB funds etc) do not affect East Malaysian voters as much as local issues (S4S⁴, state and indigenous rights, state development etc) do. These local issues are considered very pertinent in garnering support from local voters.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in one of the nine villages located in Bakelalan called Kampung Puneng Berayong where the Lun Bawang community live through a questionnaire based on the rational choice approach. The assumption of this approach is that individual voters rationalize their choice by considering economic and social benefits, rather than voting based on other factors, such as on candidate, party loyalty etc. This meant that the questionnaire was constructed to highlight key issues of concerns such as issues on government policy and program, social and economic developments, and quality of life (Mansor, Azline, & Mohd Mahadee, 2016).

A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed, targeting the Lun Bawang voters in the village. Nonetheless, only 246 questionnaires were returned completed and the findings are presented based on these completed questionnaires. The respondents were asked to select their answers based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 for Strongly Disagree to 5 for Strongly Agree.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Development Progress

A large majority of respondents (more than 96 percent, mean score 4.83) felt that Bakelalan was still lagging behind in terms of development progress. While basic

⁴ Sarawak for Sarawakians (S4S) is a local movement calling for the autonomy of Sarawak. It has amassed significant support in the recent years.

amenities like water and electricity tend to be taken for granted by urban areas folks, those residing in Bakelalan live without sufficient electricity supply most days. Electricity would only be made available until 7 pm before the villages plunge into darkness. It was only in recent years that the government introduced micro-hydro generators as well as solar power to provide 24-hour electricity to the villages.

However, there are areas that still rely heavily on diesel-powered generators for electricity. It was reported last year that some schools in the Bakelalan constituency was without power for 2 weeks because it had run out of fuel due to contractors' refusal to supply fuel, claiming they had not been compensated (BP 2018). The irony of this situation was the fact that the school was located merely meters away from the grid line.

Table 1: *Bakelalan is still lagging behind in terms of development*

Likert scale	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree (1)	2	0.8
Disagree (2)	3	1.2
Neutral (3)	2	0.8
Agree (4)	35	14.2
Strongly agree (5)	203	83.0
Total	246	100

Meanwhile, a majority of them (94 percent with a mean score 4.91) also felt strongly that there was a massive lack of proper road system (Table 2). As mentioned in the previous section, the old logging trail to Bakelalan would take six hours on four wheel drives to reach, weather permitting.

Table 2: *Bakelalan is still in need of a proper road system*

Likert scale	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree (1)	1	0.4
Disagree (2)	1	0.4
Neutral (3)	1	0.4
Agree (4)	12	4.9
Strongly agree (5)	231	93.9
Total	246	100

There is a faster but costlier way to travel to Bakelalan which would be to fly via Miri, Lawas or Bario in a DCH Twin Otter plane operated by Malaysia Airlines subsidiary, MasWings. Flight frequencies however, are only limited to three times a

week and once again, weather permitted. With that said, an establishment of a decent road system would sanction massive support from the Lun Bawang community. This is evident in Table 3 which shows that almost 100 percent of respondents declared that infrastructure development was a major factor they considered when casting their votes. The survey also showed that more than half of the respondents were very unsatisfied with how development had progressed under the BN government (Table 4).

Table 3: Infrastructure development is a main factor that influences who I vote for

Likert scale	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree (1)	1	0.4
Disagree (2)	1	0.4
Neutral (3)	0	0
Agree (4)	36	14.6
Strongly agree (5)	208	84.6
Total	246	100

Table 4: I am happy with the development brought by the BN government

Likert scale	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree (1)	103	41.9
Disagree (2)	47	19.1
Neutral (3)	2	0.8
Agree (4)	34	13.8
Strongly agree (5)	60	24.4
Total	246	100

Native Customary Rights (NCR) Land

NCR was introduced by the government to protect indigenous people's land in each state. As natives of Sarawak regard land as a significant part of their livelihood, it is no wonder that 96 percent of the Lun Bawang community insisted that rights over their land must be preserved (Table 5). With it being located in the highlands, this community relies heavily on land for sustenance. This is further supported by the data collected that 87 percent of the Lun Bawang voters would refuse to vote for the political party that infringes on this right (Table 6).

Table 5: *The rights of the Lun Bawang community over their land (NCR) must be preserved*

Likert scale	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree (1)	0	0
Disagree (2)	0	0
Neutral (3)	10	4.1
Agree (4)	98	39.8
Strongly agree (5)	138	56.1
Total	246	100

Table 6: *I will not vote for the party that takes away our NCR land*

Likert scale	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree (1)	3	1.2
Disagree (2)	4	1.6
Neutral (3)	25	10.2
Agree (4)	92	37.4
Strongly agree (5)	122	49.6
Total	246	100

Nonetheless, the rights of the Lun Bawang over their land have been violated by the government on more than one occasion, on the basis for development and what is worse, sometimes by irresponsible companies encroaching illegally especially for illicit logging activities. In response to this, many communities have filed suits against companies as well as the state governments for this encroachment of their native land.

Realizing the importance of this issue, the state government in 2018 had pledged to strengthen the protection of NCR land by issuing native communal titles in perpetuity over areas that are described as native territorial domain (NST 2018). This pledge was realized with the passing on the Land Code (Amendment) Bill 2018. This move was also supported by the federal government with a grant allocation of RM21.5 million by the Works Ministry reserved specifically for the survey of NCR land in Sarawak (The Sun Daily 2019).

Corruption

Malaysia had scored 47 points (on a scale of 0 being highly corrupted to 100 to be very clean) in the 2018 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) released by Transparency International (TI). At the global level, the country's ranking had improved from 62nd to 61st over 180 countries surveyed. Needless to say, the citizens' approval over the government's performance in tackling the issues of corruption is vital. About 60 percent of the respondents voiced refusal to vote for a corrupted government, which in comparison is a much lower percentage than that of issues of development and NCR land.

Table 7: *I refuse to vote for a corrupted government*

Likert scale	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree (1)	14	5.7
Disagree (2)	72	35.0
Neutral (3)	14	5.7
Agree (4)	59	24
Strongly agree (5)	87	35.4
Total	246	100

A leading example of corruption in Malaysia would be the 1MDB scandal. Several years ago, our then Prime Minister was caught in a predicament when he was accused of siphoning RM2.6 billion (approximated USD700 million) from the government-run development company to his personal bank accounts (Presse 2015). This scandal of course triggered widespread criticism among Malaysians, with many calling for his resignation.

An investigation was carried out on this and conveniently found that no crime was committed since the money in the personal account of Najib was a gift by a Saudi royal family. That served as no surprise since the government at the time sought to manipulate investigations and sacked detractors like the deputy prime minister and attorney general to cover up any wrong-doing. Table 8 shows that no doubt the 1MDB issue had reduced the support of the respondents towards the BN government. Again, the figures are distinctively lowered in comparison to what was regarded as local issues (Chin & Puyok, 2010).

Table 8: *1MDB issue has reduced my support towards BN*

Likert scale	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree (1)	23	9.3
Disagree (2)	70	28.5

Neutral (3)	34	13.8
Agree (4)	41	16.7
Strongly agree (5)	78	31.7
Total	246	100

Overall, Table 9 indicates the mean score of each of the issues discussed in the earlier sections. It can be observed that local issues such as infrastructure development and NCR land scored a higher mean between 4.39 – 4.91 with issues on NCR scoring the highest mean score. Meanwhile, national issues such as 1MDB play a less significant role in determining voter preferences.

Table 9: Mean score of each item

Likert scale	Mean
Bakelalan is still lagging behind in terms of development.	4.77
Bakelalan is still in need of a proper road system.	4.39
Infrastructure development is a main factor that influences who I vote for.	4.83
I am happy with the development brought by the BN government.	3.89
The rights of the Lun Bawang community over their land (NCR) must be preserved.	4.91
I will not vote for the party that takes away our NCR land.	4.39
I refuse to vote for a corrupted government.	3.83
The 1MDB issue has reduced my support towards BN	3.33

CONCLUSION

Most electoral studies in Malaysia are more inclined to focus on the religious and racial factors. It has been argued that people's voting decisions are primarily driven by race and religious considerations (Davidson 2008, Puyok 2011). While this may be so, it should not be generalized to represent the entire population since there is still a significant development gap in Malaysia between urban and rural areas. This would definitely result in rural voters having a different perspective when it comes to their voting preferences.

As indicated in this study, issues on basic amenities like electricity, proper water supply, infrastructure development, and NCR are more prevalent in winning rural voters over. These are issues that affect them directly, rather than national issues which have little impact on their daily life. However, this is not to undermined the significance of issues such as corruption, misappropriation of funds, government accountability etc. With that said, this is something that the current government needs to take into account if they are to retain their majority in the next state election. As Downs (1957, p.28)

pointed out: “Parties formulate policies in order to win elections, rather than win elections in order to formulate policies.”

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