

## **The Sarawak Chinese Voters and Their Support for the Democratic Action Party (DAP)\***

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The Democratic Action Party (DAP) is arguably Malaysia's best known opposition party. The party has been in opposition since the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. Although it has consistently won a significant percentage of votes at general elections, it has never been able to win enough seats to form a government, either at the federal or state levels.

The voting pattern for the DAP in Peninsular Malaysia is marked by two features. First, most of its votes come from the non-Malay population, i.e. from the Malaysian Chinese and Indian voters. Secondly, it regularly outperforms, in terms of number of votes, the Chinese-based parties in the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) or National Front coalition — Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Movement) and the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA).

Whatever successes the DAP enjoys in Peninsular Malaysia is not repeated in the East Malaysian States of Sabah and Sarawak, situated on the island of Borneo and divided from the Peninsular by the South China Sea. Although both states have elected several DAP candidates to the federal parliament, they are defeated at successive state elections held in the two Bornean states. This article looks at the reasons behind this phenomenon by examining DAP's performance in Sarawak since its foundation.<sup>1)</sup>

### **Brief Background of the DAP**

The DAP had its roots in the split between Singapore and Malaysia in 1965. With Singapore out of the Malaysian federation, the Malaysian side of the Singapore-based People's Action Party (PAP) had to be dissolved. Many former Malayan members of the PAP came together and launched the Democratic Action Party (DAP).<sup>2)</sup> Since then, the DAP has been one of the major opposition parties in Malaysia. Its electoral support and success has come largely the urban, non-Malay population.

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\* This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of Southeast Asian Studies (ASEASUK) in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, 25–27 April, 1996.

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1) It is interesting to note that little has been written about Chinese politics in Sarawak although there are several major works on the historical roots of the Sarawak Chinese community [Tien 1953; 1983; Chin 1981; Chew 1991]. Chinese politics is treated as a component of Sarawak politics [Milne and Ratnam 1974; Leigh 1974; Roff 1974]. As far as I can ascertain, there is nothing written about the Sarawak DAP.

2) A succinct account of DAP's founding years can be found in Lee [1987].

Since its inception in 1965, the DAP has been led by its secretary-general, Lim Kit Siang. Its basic political philosophy is based on the concept of "Malaysian Malaysia," that is, a Malaysia where ethnic status is politically irrelevant and, where plurality and multi-culturalism is protected.

This policy is in direct contrast to the policies pursued by the ruling coalition, BN. Like its predecessor the Malayan Alliance, the BN, which has been in power since Malaya became independent in 1957, is a coalition of parties that are predominantly communal. The three most important parties in the BN, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) who represent the Peninsular Malay, Chinese and Indian communities respectively. There is a racial criteria for membership in the MCA and the MIC. For UMNO, the racial criteria for membership is to be a bumiputera ("sons of the soil") or native (read Malay).<sup>3)</sup>

UMNO is the dominant partner in the BN and the posts of Prime Minister and deputy come under its purview. After racial riots erupted in 1969, UMNO blamed economic disparity between the Malays and the Chinese as the cause and placed the nation under emergency rule. In 1971, the National Economic Policy (NEP) was imposed by UMNO as a condition for lifting the state of emergency. Under this policy, bumiputeras (read Malay) were given preferential treatment in all social and political spheres. Quotas were set up for bumiputeras in universities, for business licenses and a host of other state-funded benefits which were allocated to this community [Jomo 1989; Ramasamy 1993]. Although the NEP was replaced by the National Development Policy (NDP) in 1991, its racial character was retained and preferential treatment of bumiputeras continues to this day. The implementation of the NEP and NDP has meant that race is singularly the most salient issue in Malaysian politics.

Although the DAP preaches multi-racialism ("Malaysian Malaysia"), in terms of membership and electoral support, it is undoubtedly a non-Malay, Chinese-based party. It also manages to get a significant percentage of Indian votes. This is to be expected as both these non-bumiputera communities are officially discriminated against and denied access to economic and social opportunities simply on the grounds of their ethnic status.

### **Sarawak's Political Setting**

Unlike Peninsular Malaysia's population where there are basically only three major ethnic groups: Malay (about 55%), Chinese (35%) and Indian (10%), Sarawak's 1.8 million inhabitants is much more diverse and plural. There are about 26 ethnic groups and the major ones are: Iban 30%, Chinese 30%, Malay 20%, Melanau 5%, Bidayuh 8%, and the other indigenous peoples (such as the Orang Ulu, Kayan, Kenyah, etc.) 7%. The Iban, Bidayuh and other indigenous peoples are also collectively called the Dayak, while the Malay and Melanau ethnic groups are usually politically grouped together as the Muslim Malay/Melanau. Again, unlike the situation in the Peninsular, the Muslims

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3) Previously, one had to be an ethnic Malay to join UMNO. However when UMNO expanded into Sabah, membership criteria was changed in order to accommodate the natives in Sabah who were not ethnic Malays. See Chin [1994].

are a minority in Sarawak.<sup>4)</sup> The majority of the Dayak and Chinese are non-Muslims.

Politics in Sarawak centers on the constant maneuverings among the three major political groups : Dayak, Chinese and the Muslim Malay/Melanau. The Chinese are mainly represented by the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) ; the Dayak by the Sarawak National Party (SNAP) and Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS) ; and the Muslim Malay/Melanau by Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB). However, substantial Dayak membership can be found in all these political parties. All these four parties are local Sarawak-based parties and do not have branches outside the state. Another feature of Sarawak politics is the extensive use of natural resource, specifically timber concessions, as political patronage. Locals often describe it as "politics of timber." From 1970 to 1974, Sarawak was ruled by a coalition government made up of PBB and SUPP. Since 1974, Sarawak has been ruled by the Sarawak Barisan Nasional (SBN) coalition consisting of PBB, SUPP, SNAP and PBDS.<sup>5)</sup> All the SBN component parties in turn are members of the federal BN led by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad.

From 1980 to 1991, the proportion of voters in Sarawak were roughly as follows : Chinese 33%, Ibans 30%, Malay/Melanau 26%, Bidayuh 8%, and Others 3%.<sup>6)</sup> Ethnic Chinese voters made up the majority in eight state constituencies before a constituency delineation exercise in 1988. Since then, there are 11 Chinese-majority constituencies. The bulk of the Chinese voters can be found in the main urban regions with the contestants for their votes being the SUPP and DAP.

### Formation of Sarawak DAP

The national DAP leadership had plans to expand into Sarawak in the late 1960s. Lim Kit Siang came to Kuching shortly after the 1970 Sarawak State Election, hoping to recruit several locals to start a DAP branch. However, he found the locals unreceptive.<sup>7)</sup> The election result produced a coalition government between Parti Bumiputera and SUPP. Parti Bumiputera's base of support was the Muslim Malay/Melanau community while SUPP's support came mainly from the Chinese. Both parties also enjoyed a degree of electoral support from the Dayak. The new Sarawak government was led by Parti Bumiputera's Abdul Rahman Yakub, a Muslim Melanau. Fearing that a Sarawak branch of DAP could undermine the near-total support of the Chinese community for his coalition partner, the SUPP, Rahman banned Lim Kit Siang from entering Sarawak. During the 1974 election, Lim was stopped at Kuching airport and forced to return to the Peninsular.<sup>8)</sup> The

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4) Under the Malaysian Constitution, an ethnic Malay is defined as a Muslim, thus to be born as a Malay means one is a Muslim too. Consequently in the Peninsular, Muslims make up slightly more than half of the population.

5) PBDS left the SBN in 1987 in an attempt to capture power. This attempt failed and PBDS was forced to rejoin SBN in 1994. The reasons for this are complex and lie beyond the realm of this paper. See Chin [1996b].

6) The data given here was compiled by the author from SUPP and PBB documents.

7) Interview with Lim Kit Siang, 29 June 1993.

8) *Sarawak Tribune*, 17 September 1974. Sarawak (and Sabah) enjoy special autonomy on immigration matters. This allows the chief ministers of both states to ban Malaysians from outside their respective states from entering. This right is one of the conditions under which Sarawak and Sabah entered the ↗

national DAP leadership was thus unable to enter Sarawak to set up a branch due to a hostile chief minister.

However, by late 1977, the political climate in Sarawak had changed significantly. SUPP's relationship with Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB)<sup>9)</sup> deteriorated to such an extent that SUPP was actively seeking the removal of Rahman Yakub from the chief ministership. Rahman Yakub in turn became receptive to the idea of DAP coming into Sarawak to check SUPP's strong political standing among the Chinese.

Within SUPP itself, factional fighting broke out in its Sibu Branch. The faction that lost control of the branch decide to quit SUPP. A year later, in the 1978 parliamentary elections, three of them (Chong Siew Chiang, Chieng Hie Kwong and Yong Ping Kuai) stood as independents against SUPP candidates. However, all three were defeated. During the campaign, DAP's national political bureau director and Kuala Lumpur MP, Lee Lam Thye, tried to enter Sarawak, presumably to help the three Independents, but like Lim Kit Siang earlier, he was turned back at the airport [*Chinese Daily News*, 24 August 1978; *New Straits Times*, 25 September 1979; *Special Edition*, 22 July 1978].

After their defeat, the SUPP dissidents felt that the only way to counter SUPP was to set up a new political party. The possibility of forming a new political party was already on the agenda before the 1978 parliamentary election but, due to time constraints, all the SUPP dissidents had to stand as independent candidates. They felt that the Chinese community needed another choice besides the SUPP. Discussions were held in Sibu and Sarikei towns on this option. The SUPP dissidents were joined by former members of the now-defunct Sarawak Chinese Association (SCA). The SCA was an exclusively Chinese political party that was part of the governing coalition in the 1960s. However when SUPP came into power with Rahman Yakub's Party Bumiputera in 1970, they extracted a promise from Yakub that he would apply pressure to dissolve the SCA, which subsequently happened in 1973. Former SCA members were unhappy with SUPP because they felt that SUPP had not honored a gentleman's agreement to take in all former SCA members when it was disbanded.

The key player behind the push to form a new political party to represent the Chinese was Chong Siew Chiang. Chong was the incumbent SUPP state assemblyman for Repok constituency (which covers Sarikei town) after winning it in the 1974 election. In 1977, he was suspended by SUPP for criticizing the party secretary-general, Stephen K.T. Yong, in the Council Negri (Sarawak Legislative Assembly).<sup>10)</sup> By early 1978, Chong was formally expelled from SUPP. As mentioned, he stood as an independent in the 1978 parliamentary election but was defeated by a candidate from his former party, SUPP. Another key person behind the plan of the forming of a

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↘ Malaysian federation in 1963.

9) PBB was formed by a merger between Parti Bumiputera and Dayak-based Parti Pesaka in 1973. Yakub was made president of PBB.

10) According to Chong, he made the speech after learning that Stephen Yong wrote a confidential letter to Rahman Yakub accusing Chong of criticising Rahman. According to SUPP's version, Chong fell out with the leadership after he was passed over for a post in the state cabinet after the 1974 polls (Interview with Chong Siew Chiang and senior members of SUPP in July 1993).

new political party was Ling Sie Ming, a Sibü Foochow Chinese. At that time, Ling was president of the Sarawak Taiwan Graduates Association, and was heavily involved in fund raising activities for Chinese independent schools. Like many other Chinese school graduates, Ling was increasingly disfranchised by what was seen as SUPP's inability to stop the Malay-dominated government's push to limit Chinese education and suppress Chinese culture. The majority of those who supported the plan to form an alternative Chinese party came from the Rejang basin (or the "Foochow triangle," the area delineated by the towns Sibü-Sarikei-Bintangor).

The discussion on an alternative Chinese-based political vehicle centered on whether to form a new party or link up with an existing party. Some wanted to transform a Chinese education support group, the Sarawak United Chinese Association (SUCA), into a political party. This idea was dropped when some SUCA members, who were also SUPP members, vehemently opposed it. The notion of forming a new party was also dropped as it was felt that the process would be too long and laborious.<sup>11)</sup> Moreover, Chong Siew Chiang and Ling Sie Ming were inclined to the idea of linking up with an existing party, DAP. DAP was, in a way, the obvious choice as it was Chinese-based and, equally important, the majority of the group subscribed to DAP's ideology of a "Malaysian Malaysia." Furthermore, many felt it was important to be part of a national political organisation, instead of just being a local Sarawak-based political party. After deciding that DAP was the preferred option, Chong Siew Chiang and Ling Sie Ming flew to Kuala Lumpur to meet DAP's secretary-general, Lim Kit Siang. Before the trip, Chong telephoned Rahman Yakub and informed him that he intended to set up a local DAP branch.<sup>12)</sup> He also wanted Rahman Yakub's assurance that Lim would not be barred from Sarawak in the future. Rahman Yakub told Chong that Lim Kit Siang would be permitted to enter Sarawak if there was a DAP branch there; otherwise he would still be barred, as Lim would have no political interests in Sarawak.<sup>13)</sup> By the end of August 1978, DAP had established branches in Sarikei, Binatang, Sibü and Kuching.

### **Electoral Strategies and Issues**

The DAP's campaign strategy in almost all elections has been to highlight the bumiputera non-bumiputera dichotomy in Malaysia. The official discrimination experienced in areas like educational and economic opportunities, language, religious freedom and minority rights, are interjected with allegations of corruption against the ruling BN coalition. In the Chinese community, the key issues are cultural rights, economic and educational opportunities. The official policy of promoting a Malaysian culture based on Malay culture and Islam has alienated the Chinese population who fear an erosion of their ethnic identity and forced assimilation. The government-imposed quota system for licenses, tenders and seemingly unlimited financial help for bumiputera traders has been used in successive elections. This is particularly effective among the lower income Chinese grouping who

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11) In Malaysia, the opposition usually finds it hard to register new political parties. It can take years in some cases.

12) Interview with Chong Siew Chiang, 22 May 1993.

13) Interview with Abdul Rahman Yakub, 25 June 1993.

feel (with good reason) that their chances of economic advancement are blocked solely because of their ethnic status.

Another issue dear to the heart of the Chinese community is education. Since the National Education Policy was promulgated in the 1970s, Chinese-medium schools have to depend on themselves for funding and operational costs. The Chinese schools which wish to get government grants to operate have to convert the schools into national-type schools where the emphasis and medium of instruction is on Bahasa Melayu, the national language. The majority of Chinese schools reject government grants as they are unwilling to convert, fearing that the government will slowly downgrade Chinese Mandarin once they convert. Many Chinese parents also passionately believe that the "Chinese language and culture" should be protected and that independent Chinese schools are the best guarantee of this. Because these independent Chinese schools receive little financial support from the government, many Chinese parents have to pay relatively high private school fees, compared with those of the government schools, for their children to be educated in their mother tongue. Thus these parents are especially sensitive to charges that the government was tampering with their children's Chinese education. The DAP has campaigned for the Chinese schools consistently arguing that these schools should not be discriminated against. The DAP points to the fact that many Islamic religious schools and special bumiputera-only colleges like the Mara Institutes of Technology (ITM) are fully maintained by the government, even though they cater for only one ethnic group. The DAP also knows that the Chinese-based parties in the BN, like the MCA, Gerakan and SUPP cannot promise full government aid for the independent Chinese schools as long as UMNO is the dominant partner in the BN. The best these Chinese-based BN parties can do is to get occasional government grants, especially during election year.

The potency of the educational issue in Sarawak can be seen in the 1982 parliamentary election. That year, the DAP's candidates in Bandar Kuching and Sibu constituencies used two educational issues: Merdeka University and 3-M Syllabus, to achieve their first electoral victory in Sarawak.

Merdeka University was a scheme by Chinese guilds and associations throughout Malaysia to set up a private university, which would use Mandarin and English as its medium of education. It had its roots in the late 1960s, when the federal government announced that it intended to impose a Malay language condition on students who wanted to further their education overseas. This mainly affected the Mandarin-educated students, who looked towards China, Taiwan and Singapore to further their education. The issue assumed greater significance as many Chinese students were frustrated by their attempts to enter the local tertiary institutions as strict limits were imposed on non-bumiputera entry with the introduction of NEP in 1971.<sup>14)</sup> When the Merdeka University proposal was first mooted, almost all the Sarawak Chinese guilds and associations (including those in Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah), and all the Chinese-based political parties in Malaysia, were enthusiastically supportive. However, with Chinese language a highly sensitive issue (due to UMNO), all

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14) For example, in 1970, the student population at Universiti Malaya, the country's premier tertiary institution, was made up of 40% bumiputeras and 49% Chinese. By 1975, barely four years after introduction of the NEP, the ratio had dramatically changed, to 57.3% bumiputera and 35.8% Chinese. See Kua [1990: 135].

the Chinese-based political parties in the BN more or less had to stop supporting a Chinese-medium tertiary institution. In a compromise worked out by the MCA, the federal government decided to approve the setting up of a private college instead, the Kolej Tunku Abdul Rahman (commonly referred to as TAR College), to be administered by the MCA, primarily to meet the needs of Chinese school leavers.

However, the Chinese educationalists, principally the Jaio Zong (United Chinese School Teachers Association of Malaysia) and Dong Zong (United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia), refused to back this compromise. Instead, they went ahead with a memorandum to the Yang Di-Pertua Agong (King), seeking his approval for the establishment of the Merdeka University. Under the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) 1971, any proposal for a university or college has to receive the King's approval, then parliament's. DAP were among the 4,234 Chinese organisations which signed this memorandum in early 1978. SUPP and other Chinese-based BN parties like the MCA and Gerakan, refused to sign. In September 1978, hoping to capitalize on this sensitive issue, DAP introduced an amendment to the UUCA Act in parliament, to make it meet the requirements of Merdeka University, knowing full well that the BN majority would mean the defeat of the amendment a formality. Then in 1981, the proponents of Merdeka University filed a suit against the federal government, arguing that it had no legal power to reject the proposal. A Queen's Counsel was engaged, and Chinese associations and guilds throughout the nation staged fund raising activities to fund the court challenge. The fund, called "Merdeka University \$1 per head legal fund campaign," received enthusiastic support in Sarawak. By June 1980, even without SUPP's support, the fund managed to raise nearly \$280,000 in Sarawak alone [*Berita Petang Sarawak*, 13 June 1980]. In November 1981, after a month-long trial, the High Court ruled that the federal government had acted within its rights in rejecting the establishment of Merdeka University. Undaunted, Merdeka University supporters lodged an appeal in the Federal Court in February 1982. In July, the Federal Court turned down the appeal by a 4:1 majority decision [Kua 1990: 156; 1985]. Hence, at the time of the 1982 parliamentary election, the bitterness generated by the court case was still fresh in the minds of most Chinese voters. DAP became the major beneficiary of this anger.

The second issue relating to education was the federal government's introduction of a new curriculum for Chinese primary schools, a few months prior to the 1982 parliamentary election. This curriculum affected the way Mandarin was taught in Chinese-medium primary schools throughout Malaysia. Called the 3M System (*membaca, mennulis and memkira*, Malay for read, write and count), the syllabus placed emphasis on three core areas: reading, writing and mathematics. Many Chinese educationalists were incensed by the 3M, claiming that it would destroy Chinese education, and calling it the "back door" entry to the government's push to destroy Chinese education. They argued that Mandarin competency would decline as the 3M did not place sufficient emphasis on the learning of the complex Chinese Mandarin characters. Many Chinese parents thus became alarmed and DAP used this issue to gain great political mileage, calling the 3M system "*main, minum, makan*" (play, drink, eat). They argued that the non-Malay BN Parties' impotent position in the BN was reflected in its inability to reject the imposition of the 3M syllabus. SUPP

candidates found themselves on the defensive, and could only promise to make changes to the 3M syllabus after the election. In the highly emotional atmosphere created by the election campaign, this was seen by many Sarawak Chinese voters as a tacit admission that SUPP was unhappy but could do nothing within the UMNO-dominated BN coalition. This combined with the Merdeka University issue, helped DAP candidates to win the two-Chinese majority parliamentary seats — Kuching and Sibul — with ease.

In sum, DAP campaign issues center on the limited political and economic rights of the non-Malay population. In every election, DAP has charged that the BN government is pursuing a “one culture, one language and one religion” (read Malay, Bahasa Melayu and Islam) policy.

SUPP is the main opponent of DAP for Chinese votes in Sarawak. SUPP, like DAP espouses a multi-racial philosophy, but in reality, since the majority of its members are ethnic Chinese, it is essentially a Chinese party. To counter DAP’s basic arguments that as part of the establishment, SUPP cannot promote Chinese interests, it’s anti-DAP strategy relies on regionalism and Sarawak Chinese nationalism. In consecutive elections, SUPP stressed that DAP has “no business” in Sarawak politics, as it is a “Semenanjung” (Peninsular) party promoting the interests of the Peninsular Chinese and the personal ambition of Lim Kit Siang. The aim is to tap into the already strong regional sentiments found in the Borneo states of Sarawak and Sabah. In both these states, the general population is distrustful of Peninsular Malaysians whom they perceive to be the new “colonizers.” When both states entered the Malaysia federation in 1963, they were explicitly given state autonomy over areas like education, immigration and religion. These rights were contained in a memorandum called the “Twenty Points.” Since then, there has been a general perception that these “Twenty Points” have been withered away by Kuala Lumpur. Moreover in both these states, the Malay populations are a minority and Islam is not deeply rooted. Kuala Lumpur’s heavy emphasis on racial politics, Malay special rights and Islam are seen as interference and imposition of an alien political order.<sup>15)</sup> The general population in Sarawak and Sabah is also resentful of the fact that they have to share their rich natural resources, especially petroleum, with the Peninsular. In 1974, the federal government created a national petroleum monopoly, Petronas, which assumed control of the petroleum industry in Malaysia. This, in effect, means that the huge financial gains from vast oil fields found off the coast of Sarawak goes directly into the national treasury. Sarawak gets only five percent as oil royalties. Thus, SUPP regularly uses the anti-federal sentiments against DAP.

Voters are also regularly told by SUPP that voting for DAP will harm the Sarawak Chinese who are “different” from their counterparts in Peninsular Malaysia. SUPP points out that in Sarawak’s plural political setting where there are three main political groupings — Muslim Malay/Melanau, Chinese and Dayak, the Malay/Melanau cannot hope to rule alone and that the Sarawak Chinese (read SUPP) must play the role of “kingmaker” to gain the maximum benefit for the community. A dramatic example of this can be seen in the 1987 state election when the results were: Sarawak BN 28 (PBB 14, SUPP 11, SNAP 3), and Opposition 20 (Permas 5, PBDS 15). Without SUPP, the

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15) For a discussion of the Twenty Points and Sarawak (and Sabah’s) grievances, see Luping [1989].



PBB-led administration would not have survived. A similar situation happened in 1970 when SUPP's 12 seats were crucial to the formation of the Parti Bumiputera-led state government.

This position is in sharp contrast to MCA and Gerakan's weak position in Peninsular politics where by a combination of gerrymandering and population majority (Malays make up more than half of the population in Peninsular Malaysia), the Malays (read UMNO) have the ability to win enough seats to rule alone. According to the party, SUPP's "kingmaker" position is reflected by the fact that a SUPP nominee always holds the Sarawak finance and infrastructure portfolios. These two state cabinet posts control the bulk of government contracts and SUPP is in a position to grant significant business opportunities. SUPP's crucial position in the governing coalition also meant that the Sarawak state government regularly give grants to independent Chinese schools, temples and churches in Sarawak. On DAP's assertion of "one culture, one language and one religion," SUPP argues that it is the moderating voice in the BN and without its representation, things would be worse for the Chinese. In essence, SUPP's argument is : it is not able to exert influence on policies in areas like culture, language and religion because they are federal policies controlled by UMNO. However, when it comes to state level politics, SUPP makes an impact and uses its crucial "kingmaker" role to protect and extract maximum concessions for Chinese interests, especially in the business arena [Wong 1986].

The political issues raised by both DAP and SUPP create a dilemma for the Sarawak Chinese voters. On the one hand, being on the receiving end of discriminatory government policies, DAP's call for the eradication of the bumiputera/non-bumiputera categories is appealing and is what most Chinese demand. Supporting DAP would ensure that the grievances of the community would be heard. On the other hand, the Sarawak Chinese know that, unlike the Chinese-based BN parties in Peninsular Malaysia, which have been completely marginalized by UMNO, SUPP has successfully protected Chinese economic, social and cultural interests in Sarawak. They know that SUPP's strength within the Sarawak BN is dependent on its ability to hold on to the Chinese-majority state constituencies, which in turn give SUPP the role as a powerbroker. They also know that the bulk of economic resources and opportunities distribution is done at the state level, where SUPP is the most effective, and not at the federal level.

Under such circumstances, the rational Sarawak Chinese voter would want to support both parties. Under ordinary circumstances, this would not be possible for the voter. Yet this is possible for the Chinese voter in Sarawak. This is achieved by voting for DAP at parliamentary level and for SUPP at state elections. As mentioned, SUPP's ability to promote and protect Chinese interests at the state level is based on its ability to hold the crucial Chinese-majority constituencies. Not to vote for SUPP at state elections risks a weakening of SUPP's (read Chinese) bargaining position within the Sarawak BN. Not to vote for SUPP at parliamentary level carries little or no risk as SUPP has little bargaining power in the federal BN. After all, SUPP can only win, at most, less than eight parliamentary constituencies. In a 192-seat parliament, this is rather insignificant. Rather a vote for DAP at parliamentary level would signal a protest vote against the government's continued discriminatory policies against non-bumiputeras.

### Electoral Performance

As DAP mainly appeals to Chinese voters, most of its candidates stand in Chinese-majority constituencies. The first DAP candidates in Sarawak appeared in the 1979 state election when it fielded 11 candidates, including a woman. Interestingly enough, the female DAP candidate was the first ethnic Chinese female candidate in Sarawak. However, all 11 lost to SUPP candidates. The following year, the DAP fielded five candidates in the 1982 parliamentary election. This time, the DAP managed to win two constituencies — Bandar Kuching and Bandar Sibu (see above for the explanation on why DAP was successful). Sim Kwang Yang, popularly known by his acronym SKY, won against Loke Yik Ping, a SUPP candidate in the Bandar Kuching constituency. Sim polled 19,200 votes to Loke's 15,623, winning by 3,577 votes. Ling Sie Ming won against another SUPP-BN candidate, Wong Soon Kai, in Bandar Sibu by polling 14,432. However, Ling's a small majority, 141 votes, suggests that the election could have gone either way.

Buoyed by its parliamentary electoral success, DAP fielded seven candidates in the Sarawak state election of 1983. All were unsuccessful. Even Sim Kwang Yang and Ling Sie Ming, who had won just months earlier in 1982, lost in state constituencies which came under the boundaries of the parliamentarians constituencies held by them. Sim Kwang Yang stood in Padungan state constituency which is part of the Bandar Kuching parliamentary constituency while Ling Sie Ming stood in Maling which is part of the Bandar Sibu parliamentary constituency. As argued earlier, SUPP's strategy was to remind the voters that state politics were different from parliamentary politics and that the Sarawak Chinese community could not afford to weaken its position in the state government. This proved successful as the same voters who supported DAP months earlier in the 1982 parliamentary elections were now supporting SUPP candidates in the state election.

In the subsequent 1986 parliamentary election, DAP managed to retain its Bandar Kuching constituency. However, its Bandar Sibu incumbent, Ling Sie Ming, lost to a SUPP candidate, Tieu Sung Seng. As mentioned earlier, Ling had won earlier in 1982 by a tiny majority and he could not consolidate his support by 1986. Ling was also severely hurt by accusations that he was ineffective as an MP due to his poor command of the national language.<sup>16)</sup>

In the 1987 state election, the pattern was repeated. DAP fielded 11 candidates but again all were defeated. In the 1990 parliamentary election, DAP was successful in two constituencies — Bandar Kuching and Lanang. Sim Kwang Yang retained Bandar Kuching for the third consecutive time. Lanang, a new parliamentary constituency created by a delineation exercise in 1986, was won by Jason Wong Sing Nam, a relatively newcomer to politics. A lawyer by profession, he defeated the incumbent SUPP's Tieu Sung Seng.

This pattern was repeated in the 1991 state election and the 1995 parliamentary elections (see Tables 1 and 2).

From the tables above, it is clear that Sarawak DAP has been consistently successful in parliamentary elections but has failed miserably in state-level elections. Bearing in mind that the

16) As noted earlier, Ling was educated in Taiwan, thus Chinese Mandarin is his first language. The official language for debates in the Malaysian Parliament is the national language, Bahasa Malayu.

**Table 1** Performance of DAP (Sarawak) at Parliamentary Elections

Election	No. of Candidates	Seats Won	Number of Votes
1982	5 (4)*	2 (2)	48,623
1986	5 (4)	1 (1)	68,197
1990	8 (5)	2 (2)	87,017
1995	6 (4)	1	78,456

Source : Election Commission Malaysia

\* Figures in parentheses refer to candidates standing in Chinese-Majority constituencies

**Table 2** Performance of DAP (Sarawak) at State Elections

Election	No. of Candidates	Seats Won	Number of Votes	As a % of Total Votes
1979	11 ( 6)*	0	39,893	10.3
1983	7 ( 5)	0	31,246	8.66
1987	11 ( 8)	0	51,341	11.38
1991	18 (10)	0	45,549	9.69

Source : Election Commission Malaysia

\* Figures in parentheses refer to candidates standing in Chinese-Majority constituencies

voters were essentially the same for both types of elections, it is safe to conclude that the same voters who voted for DAP at parliamentary level do not vote for DAP at the state level. The other striking point evident from the tables is that DAP has been singularly successful only in Chinese-majority constituencies.

The voting pattern for DAP also indicates that its stronghold lies in the Chinese-dominated urban areas of the state capital Kuching and to a lesser extent, the timber-rich town of Sibul. Sim Kwang Yang won decisively against SUPP candidates in three successive parliamentary elections (1982, 1986 and 1990). Sim, who comes from a poor family and had put himself through school and university, is generally regarded as a "people's man" by the Kuching polity. During electoral campaigns, he argued successfully that if he were to lose, he would lose "everything," while his SUPP opponent would still be taken care of financially by SUPP regardless of the outcome. Sim's support in successive parliamentary elections has been fairly consistent, outpolling his SUPP opponent by more than 10%. He won by 3,577 votes in 1982, by 7,974 in 1986 and by 6,164 in 1990. In percentage terms, the margins of victory were 10, 17 and 14% respectively.

However, in the 1995 parliamentary election, the SUPP's Song Swee Guan defeated Sim with a 3,184 vote majority. The basic reason for Sim's defeat was that his opponent, Song, was equally popular with the Kuching electorate. Song was the sitting Kuching mayor as well as its State Assemblyman. Song began to campaign in earnest and by the time of the election in April 1995, he had already been campaigning for at least ten months. SUPP campaigned on Song's commitment to bring more "development" to Kuching while attacking Sim for "doing nothing" since 1982.

Moreover, Sim did not actively campaign for his re-election. While Song was seen in almost every public event and held extensive *ceramahs*, Sim was not widely seen in the electorate and did not undertake any serious door-to-door canvassing. Sim's behaviour could be explained by the fact that he was disenchanted with the Chinese electorate and spent more time on DAP's attempts to capture the rural vote.<sup>17)</sup> The Kuching electorate was also caught up in the national swing towards the ruling coalition, BN.<sup>18)</sup>

Although DAP had twice won in Sibul, its support is less uncertain. Unlike Kuching, Sibul is dominated by the Foochow dialect group.<sup>19)</sup> Foochows make up about 84% of Sibul's population and are generally regarded as the richest and most commercially shrewd group among the Sarawak Chinese dialect groupings. Since the early 1980s, the Foochows have dominated SUPP and this has made the clannish Foochow reluctant to back the DAP. In 1982 when DAP won in Sibul, the majority was only 141 votes. Subsequently, in 1986, DAP lost the Sibul parliamentary seat by 546 votes. In 1990, DAP won the Lanang seat (most of the Lanang voters were from the old Sibul constituency), again by a slim majority of 3,973 votes. In percentage terms, the margins of victory were 0.5, -1 and 14% respectively. In the 1995 polls, SUPP fielded Tiong Thai King, who comes from an elite Foochow family. The Tiong family controls the Rimbunan Hijau Group, which is reputed to be the biggest timber contractor in Malaysia. With unlimited funding, the DAP incumbent never stood a chance against Tiong.

In fact, the only constituency won by the DAP in 1995 was the Bintulu constituency. The DAP candidate, Chiew Ching Sing, won against veteran politician, James Wong Kim Min, SNAP's president. Chiew's victory can easily be explained by the fact that Chiew had substantial Chinese and Dayak support in the constituency. Before switching over to Sarawak DAP, Chiew was a key member of SUPP's Bintulu branch. SUPP leaders had been grooming him for a state constituency before he fell out with the SUPP leadership over the Bintulu parliamentary constituency in the 1990 election. Chiew wanted the Bintulu seat but it was given to SNAP's James Wong. Chiew subsequently stood against James Wong as a DAP candidate and lost narrowly by 287 votes. In 1995, Chiew won by 1,794 votes. Chiew's Dayak vote mainly came from Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS) supporters; many PBDS supporters did not like James Wong whom they blamed for Dayak disunity.<sup>20)</sup>

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17) In several conversations, Sim said he was not particularly impressed with the Kuching Chinese whom he felt only wanted him "far away in KL making noises." In recent years, Sim has developed an interest in environmental issues, and is deeply involved with the Sarawak rural anti-logging campaign.

18) The 1995 parliamentary election gave the BN its best showing for the past three decades. The BN took 162 of 192 seats in the *Dewan Rakyat* (House of Representatives).

19) Kuching is mainly populated by the Hakka and Hokkein dialect groups.

20) The reasons behind PBDS-SNAP feud are beyond the scope of this article, suffice to say that many Dayaks blamed James Wong for a party split in SNAP which led to the formation of PBDS in 1983. For details, see Chin [1996b].

### **Conclusion and Prospects**

The formation of the Sarawak DAP can thus be attributed to the coming together of three distinct groups. The first was a small group of influential SUPP members who disagreed with SUPP leadership. Chong Siew Chiang was the prime example. The second group were SUPP members who were sidelined after the Sibul branch split in 1976. The third group comprised former SCA members looking for an opportunity to start a political party to challenge SUPP. These former SCA members never forgave SUPP for indirectly causing the demise of their party in 1973. In other words, all these men were either linked to the now defunct SCA, or the losing side in the 1976 SUPP Sibul branch split.

DAP's entry into Sarawak was also a result of Rahman Yakub's attempt to weaken his coalition partner, SUPP. That DAP had the potential to attract Chinese votes and weaken SUPP was attractive to Rahman as his relationship with SUPP was deteriorating by the late 1970s.

It can be clearly seen that since the inception of DAP in Sarawak in 1978, it has had mixed electoral success. On one hand, it has been able to win over urban, primarily ethnic Chinese voters at parliamentary elections. On the other, the same voters rejected the same DAP candidates at consecutive state-level elections. However, winning constituencies alone does not represent the true picture. When we look at the actual votes DAP received (taking into account the number of DAP candidates), we can see that the DAP had steadily retained its share of the total vote. However, because of the "first-past-the-post" voting system, the DAP's representation in the legislature was not in proportion to the votes it receives.

The reason for this state of affairs appears to be that the sophisticated urban voters "wanting it both ways," that is, representation at both government and opposition levels. The urban voters are influenced by Western notions that a strong opposition is needed to check government policies (DAP is commonly referred to by the Chinese press as the "watchdog") and to sustain a democracy. Because the DAP voters are mainly ethnic Chinese, Sarawak DAP's ability to win at parliamentary level must be seen as a "protest vote" against federal government policies seen to be racially discriminatory and detrimental to the Chinese community. Hence, the Chinese DAP vote will depend on how well the DAP can articulate the grievances of the Chinese community.

In recent years, the Sarawak DAP has tried to broaden its base of support by expanding into the rural areas, where the majority of the population are indigenous Dayak. With environmental issues, like logging and deforestation, increasingly becoming political, the Sarawak DAP had launched a "Go Rural" campaign in the late 1980s. The campaign was motivated by the belief that the Dayak vote is the key to DAP's future in Sarawak politics. The Sarawak DAP leadership felt that the party could win a state seat through Dayak support given that the Dayak voter do not, generally, "want it both ways." The "Go Rural" policy is also meant to get rid of the "Semenanjung" tag.

It is too early to assess the effectiveness of this campaign although it could be said that its success hinges on the DAP's ability to project itself as a truly multi-racial and local Sarawak-based party. At the present moment, DAP is still seen by many as an opposition "Chinese" party. This perception is perhaps inevitable as its founders and elected representatives are Chinese. The bulk

of its membership is also Chinese. In Sarawak, its Chinese image is reinforced by the fact that all its successful candidates are ethnic Chinese elected in largely Chinese urban constituencies. Additionally, the majority of its candidates continue to stand in Chinese-majority constituencies. Apart from this, the Sarawak DAP faced the additional problem of being labelled as a “Semenanjung” party. Given the strong regional sentiment found in Sarawak (and Sabah), this tag can be detrimental to the recruitment of indigenous members. Unless the Sarawak DAP widens its support significantly among the non-Chinese population and removes the tag of being a “Semenanjung” party, its support will be mainly confined to the anti-establishment Chinese voters.

The key to future DAP successes will thus be its ability to convince the urban Chinese voter not to split their vote at parliamentary and state elections. However this presents a dilemma for the Sarawak DAP. If the Chinese voter do not split the vote, there is a likelihood that DAP would be wiped out at parliamentary elections, assuming that the Chinese support for SUPP at the state level is unshakeable. The reverse is also true. If the parliamentary Chinese DAP supporters maintain their voting preference, then DAP stands a real chance of winning state constituencies.

The DAP’s ability to capture state seats is, in part, also dependent on the SUPP. If the SUPP do not deliver the economic opportunities to the Sarawak Chinese or protect their interests, the Sarawak Chinese may decide that they have nothing to lose by supporting the DAP, a situation similar to the present SUPP’s position in the federal parliament (see above).

The current Chinese voting trend will change in the near future for two reasons. First, the Chinese voters in Sarawak are getting more sophisticated. They know that without opposition in the Sarawak Legislative Assembly, the SUPP will be complacent and arrogant. Voting for a Chinese opposition, in this case DAP, as there is no other credible Chinese opposition alternative, is the only way to keep the SUPP on its toes. Second, the distinction between parliamentary issues and state issues, used successfully by SUPP to divide the Chinese vote, will not work in the long run as the distinction becomes finer. The political, social and economic discrimination faced by the Chinese population in Sarawak is similar to those faced by the Peninsula Chinese. The SUPP accusation that Sarawak DAP is a “Semenanjung” party will not work in the long run.

Based on the two reasons outlined above, it is likely that DAP will win at the state-level in the near future. Voting for the DAP at state level will also mean that the Sarawak Chinese can have it “both ways” at the state level, i.e., representation at both the government and opposition level.

The Sarawak Chinese community want it both ways and looks set to vote accordingly.

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