

Book Review/*Ulasan Buku*

The Iban Factor in Sarawak Politics by Jayum A Jawan. Universiti Pertanian Press, 1993, pages 108. Reviewed by Vejai Balasubramaniam.

The rise of the nation-states has made nationalism the most successful political ideology since circa the nineteenth century. Such stirring of the nationalist passion has always led men to step forward and sacrifice themselves for the nations. Thus, when Milosovic began striking the fires of Serbian nationalism he caused a once stable multi-ethnic state to degenerate into a slaughter-house riven with mistrust and hate.

It is precisely this latent chauvanism which has made nationalism increasingly popular among politicians aspiring for power. Hence, wherever and whenever nationalism and nationalist sentiments are raised it is necessary to take them seriously.

This book, by an Iban, based on his doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Hull is about the role of Ibanism and Iban nationalism in Sarawak politics. This East Malaysian State along with British North Borneo, Singapore and the Federation of Malaya, formed Malaysia in 1963.

Seeing Malaysia through the ethnic lens and refering to a host of statistical data (and therein lies the book's strong point: the appendix contains a good collation of useful data) the author argues that the exclusion (albeit with devious intention) of the Ibans, by the Malays and Chinese, from the political process has led the former to lag behind the latter economically. Hence, only through the capture and control of political power will they be able to alleviate their condition. Ibanism or Iban nationalism is therefore a political movement born out of political and economic peripheralisation.

By using the terms Iban and Dayak interchangeably, the writer points to the role played by "second generation Ibans" through the PBDS (Parti Bangsa Dayak Sarawak) in mobilising Dayak nationalism behind the need for the non-Muslim Bumiputeras to capture political power in the Council *Negeri* elections of 1983, 1987 and 1991.

The fact that the PBDS has been able to increase its share of the total votes polled from 43.5% in 1983, when the party was just formed, to 51.2% in the 1987 State elections, thus dwindling the non-Muslim *Bumiputera* support from SNAP and hence, the ruling coalition front in the *negeri* indicates that this sector of the population are discontented. However, despite the advantage of demography (non-Muslim Bumiputeras outnumber the Muslim Bumiputeras) and the presence of the

structural preconditions for nationalism, the party's inability to capture power is puzzling. For Jayum, the blame lies in "the peculiar Iban (Dayak) political disposition" and "their rural nature".

The "peculiar Iban (Dayak) political disposition" which seems to be inhibiting the unity of the community behind the cause of Dayakism, according to the writer, is their tendency to vacillate between regionalism and supra-regionalism. A "tendency" which in an election influences voting patterns either in favour of a particular candidate or a party.

With regards to "the rural nature of the Iban population", Jayum argues that the ability of the Ibans to return "to their long houses and still maintain some level of existence" serves as a safety valve for the community. Thus while they may be economically disadvantaged the situation is not serious enough to warrant political action. Presumably, therefore, when the situation gets serious enough we will see members of the community rallying behind the PBDS.

But such explanations as the above is not only apologist of the party leadership, "the second generation Ibans", but indicates a lack, intentionally or unintentionally, of understanding by the writer of the more salient features of Dayakism in general and Sarawak politics in particular.

Firstly, the failure of majority of non-Muslim Bumiputeras in Sarawak to identify with "Dayak (Iban) nationalism" indicates the lack of nationalist fervour among them. Hence, the 7 Dayak seats that PBDS controls in Sarawak, and which Jayum extols as a mani-festation of Dayakism, is actually the product of regionalism. That is, it so happens, the Ibans in those constituencies have a liking, "a dispensation", for the PBDS candidates in those areas.

Secondly, the fact that a large proportion of voters do support the party indicates they do feel economically disadvantaged. But that they did not all rally round the PBDS's "Ketua Menteri Sarawak 1992 (KMS-1992)" campaign indicates a lack of confidence in the party's leadership. To be sure the manner in which the political elite in PBDS vacillated exposed their more narrow interests. Hence, it is not suprising why the voters did not rally around the PBDS, and, thus, pivot an Iban to the post of Ketua Menteri.

Thirdly, Dayakism itself is a misnomer. There is no ethnic group called Dayak. The term, as used by the White Rajahs and the colonial government, subsumed all non-Muslim indigenous people of Sarawak, and served as a means of simplifying categorisation. Herein is reason itself why PBDS could not get all non-Muslim Bumiputera group to rally behind it.

There has always been a tendency for political pundits to regard politics in the two East Malaysian States, Sabah and Sarawak, as being

similar. Hence, following the rise of Kadazan nationalism as articulated by PBS (Party Bersatu Sabah) in Sabah in 1985 they contended a similiar situation would arise in Sarawak. However, when the PBDS failed to gain political power in 1987 and 1991, pundits like the author concluded that it is only a matter of time.

Such generalisations as the above ignores the important role played by the political leadership and the electorates' perception of them in determining the outcome of elections. The perception held among non-Muslims in Sabah of the sincerity and commitment of the PBS, in particular for its leader, helped propel the party to power. The failure of the same in Sarawak in part indicates the lack of similiar sentiments among non-Muslims there for the PBDS and its elite.

Jayum's failure to take the above into consideration, thus, causes him to blame the PBDS' failure to capture political power on 'the peculiar dispensations of the Dayaks'. Thus, Jayum has given us a work which despite exposing the weakness of the ethnic lens as an academic tool in perceiving Malaysia, also contains a 'hidden agenda'. That is, by viewing politics in Sarawak as a competition between different ethnic groups and arguing the need for Ibans to capture and control political power, he is articulating the political goals of the "second generation Ibans" in PBDS.

The practice of writing PhD dissertations with 'hidden agendas' is becoming fashionable. However, the fact that this book has passed out as an academic exercise from Hull, where many scholarly works have been produced, is disconcerting. For it gives rise to concern over the worth of reading future work originating therein – at least, those produced under the supervision of Professor King.