

The Politics of Development in Sarawak

Politik Pembangunan di Sarawak

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ABSTRAK

Di ambang pembentukan Malaysia, Sarawak adalah sebuah negeri miskin yang mempunyai kemudahan infrastruktur yang terhad dan pertumbuhan ekonomi yang perlahan. Pemimpin Tanah Melayu mengambil kesempatan terhadap kepincangan ini dengan menawarkan pelbagai janji pembangunan sebagai tarikan kepada Sarawak untuk membentuk Malaysia. Pembangunan, dalam konteks ini, menjadi 'komoditi' yang negara sebagai 'pengeluar' mendagangkannya kepada masyarakat Sarawak sebagai balasan sokongan mereka kepada pembentukan negara baru ini. Tren mempolitikkan pembangunan berterusan dalam era pasca kemerdekaan Sarawak dan menjadi semakin berleluasa dalam era pemerintahan masa kini. Artikel ini mengupas amalan negara mempolitikkan pembangunan dengan menganalisis perbelanjaan kerajaan negeri dalam projek luar bandar dan amalan penaungan pilihan raya yang didukung oleh parti pemerintah sejak tahun 1970 hingga 2006. Berbeza dengan penulisan lain, artikel ini mengupas secara terperinci strategi penaungan pilihan raya yang diamalkan oleh parti pemerintah dengan membahagikannya kepada empat bentuk yang berbeza, iaitu janji-janji projek pembangunan baru, pemberian geran kewangan dan imbuhan lain, perasmian projek pembangunan yang telah siap, dan upacara pecah tanah projek baru. Adalah diujahkan bahawa pembangunan telah dieksploitasi negara sebagai alat dominasi yang akhirnya menghambat pencambahan demokrasi dan kesaksamaan ekonomi. Akibatnya, dominasi pilihan raya parti pemerintah, Barisan Nasional, berterusan di Sarawak termasuklah dalam pilihan raya 2008 baru-baru ini. Sebagai kesimpulan, makalah ini akan membincangkan masa depan politik pembangunan di Sarawak dan impaknya terhadap pengundi dan juga parti pemerintah.

Kata kunci: Dominasi, negara pembangunan, penaungan pilihan raya, politik pembangunan, pilihan raya

ABSTRACT

Prior to the formation of Malaysia, Sarawak was a poor state with scarce physical infrastructure and slow economic growth. The Malayan leaders took

advantage of this appalling condition by offering various development promises as an inducement for Sarawak to help form Malaysia. Development, therefore, became a 'commodity' which the state, as the 'producer', traded with the people of Sarawak in return for their support towards the formation of the new state. The politicisation of development has persisted in post-Independence Sarawak and becomes especially rampant during the present state leadership. This article dissects the state's practice of politicising development by looking at the negeri government's expenditure on minor rural projects and the practice of electoral patronage espoused by the ruling party from 1970 to 2006. Unlike the existing literature, this article analyses the ruling party's strategy of electoral patronage by dividing it into four separate forms, namely promises of new development projects, issuance of financial grants and other 'goodies', opening ceremonies of completed projects, and ground-breaking ceremonies of new projects. It is argued that development has been exploited by the state as a tool of domination, thus hampering the growth of democracy and economic parity. As a result, the electoral domination of the ruling party, Barisan Nasional, has persisted in Sarawak including in the most recent 2008 election. To conclude, this article will discuss the future of the politics of development in Sarawak and its impact on the electorate and the ruling party.

Keywords: Domination, developmentalist state, electoral patronage, politics of development, elections

INTRODUCTION

In enticing Sarawak (and Sabah) to form Malaysia, the then Prime Minister of Malaya Tunku Abdul Rahman made a promise to the people of Sarawak that the pace of development in the *negeri* (state) would be intensified, thus generating economic growth and improving the life of its people. The promise of development was so important to the Borneo territories, especially Sarawak that it became the basis of the agreement to form Malaysia in 1963 as stated in the Inter-Governmental Committee (IGC) Report. The Inter-Governmental Committee which was established on 28 February 1963 set to work on the constitutional arrangements for North Borneo (later known as Sabah), Sarawak and Brunei to form Malaysia (Tunku 1977: 91). After successfully luring Sarawak into the new Federation, the central state kept its development promise by allocating \$400 million (10.5 percent of the central government total development allocation) to Sarawak under the First Malaysia Plan (1966-1970). With the huge development fund, Sarawak was poised to increase its development expenditure by 57 percent over its expenditure during the last five years (1961-1965) (Malaysia 1965: 71).

After the formation of Malaysia, the politicisation of development has persisted and becomes especially rampant during the present state leadership.

As a result, development is transformed into a “commodity” which the state, as the “producer”, trades with its people in return for their support and loyalty. This article aims to analyse the nexus between politics and development in Malaysia by scrutinizing the state’s exploitation of development as a tool to dominate the people of Sarawak, resulting in the continued supremacy of the ruling party, Barisan Nasional (BN). In this article, it is argued that the state exploits the distribution of development projects via the strategy of electoral patronage, espoused by Sarawak Chief Ministers, which intends to reward the ruling party’s supporters and punish its detractors. The politicisation of development, adversely, results in the stunted development of democratic discourse and widening economic gaps among the populace.

THE DEVELOPMENTALIST STATE

A recent work on developmentalist state in Malaysia was written by a prominent Malaysianist, Abdul Rahman Embong (2008: 27-28) who traces the expanding literature on developmentalist state not only in Malaysia, but also the world over. According to Abdul Rahman Embong (2008: 29), although the debate on developmentalist state started in the 1980s, the existence of these states could be traced back to the early period of the spread of capitalism. Meanwhile in Malaysia, the birth of developmentalist state took place after the bloody 13 May 1969 which triggered a fundamental shift in the country’s economic policies and political system.

One of the factors that contributed to the riot was the Malays’ (the most dominant ethnic group in Malaysia) dissatisfaction towards their economic backwardness as compared to the other ethnic groups, especially the Chinese (Faaland et. al. 2005: 13). Thus, in an effort to avoid the repeat of May Thirteenth, a new long term economic policy, known as the New Economic Policy (NEP), was introduced. The NEP was formulated to achieve two pronged objectives of eradicating poverty irrespective of race and restructuring society by eliminating the identification of race with economic function. Overall, the NEP had a mixture of successes and failures. Undoubtedly, under the long term economic plan, the level of poverty in Malaysia, especially among the Malays, had been drastically reduced. Unfortunately, the inter-ethnic, intra-ethnic and rural-urban dimensions of poverty continued to persist (Malaysia 1991: 47; Berma 2003: 250; Gomez & Jomo 2001: 19). From the regional perspective, Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, Perak, Sabah and Sarawak still recorded a significantly high incidence of poverty compared to other more developed *negeris*. In terms of the NEP’s goal of restructuring society, the achievements fell short of the target set under the long term economic plan. The Bumiputera was still over-represented in the agricultural sector although their share of employment in the manufacturing and industrial sectors had increased (Malaysia 1991: 47). This interventionist policy marked

the ascendancy of a developmentalist state in Malaysia. Under the NEP which covered a period of 20 years (1971 to 1990), four development plans had been implemented, namely the Second Malaysia Plan (1971-1975), the Third Malaysia Plan (1976-1980), the Fourth Malaysia Plan (1981-1985) and the Fifth Malaysia Plan (1986-1990).

In the early period of the NEP (Second and Third Malaysia Plans), the central state contributed more than 70 percent of the total development expenditure incurred by the public sector. However, starting from the Fourth Malaysia Plan, the contribution of the central state was slowly reduced to about 57 percent of total development expenditure and below 50 percent in the Sixth Malaysia Plan. The decline in the central state's development expenditure was systematically done in order to ease its financial position. The *negeri* with surplus revenue were expected to shoulder a larger share of responsibilities in financing development projects which were within their purview. Meanwhile, the *negeri* which were in deficit would be urged to examine ways and means of raising more fiscal resources so as to lessen their dependence on the central state (Malaysia 1971: 78). In Sarawak, the central state's contribution to the total development expenditure within the NEP period dropped drastically from RM3,113 million (6.7 percent of the total development expenditure of the public sector in Malaysia) in the Fourth Malaysia Plan to RM1,839 million (5.2 percent of the total development expenditure of the public sector in Malaysia) in the Fifth Malaysia Plan. Thus, in order to maintain the tempo of development in Sarawak, the *negeri* government had to bear a bigger financial responsibility by depending on the tax revenues collected from its rich natural resources, namely oil and timber.

With the 'end' of the NEP, a new long-term economic plan, known as the New Development Policy (NDP), was formulated. The NDP represents the first development stage of the Vision 2020 which ultimately aims to steer Malaysia to a developed-nation status by the year 2020. In contrast to the NEP, the new long term economic plan was designed for a shorter time period (1991-2000), covering only two five-year economic plans, namely the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991-1995) and the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000). While the NDP maintained the basic strategies of the NEP, it also introduced several new dimensions; (1) to shift the focus of poverty eradication strategy towards the eradication of hardcore and relative poverty; (2) to develop an active Bumiputera Commercial and Industrial Community (BCIC) in order to increase the meaningful participation of the Bumiputera communities in the economic sector; (3) to rely more on the participation of the private sector in restructuring society; and (4) to focus on human resource development as a fundamental requirement for achieving the objectives of growth and distribution (Malaysia 1991b: 4). The Malaysian economy had achieved a tremendous growth during the NDP period by recording an average growth rate of seven percent per annum, thus achieving the target set by the NDP (Malaysia 2001b: 34). In terms of reducing poverty, the NDP was able to further reduce the incidence of poverty in Malaysia and also the number

of hardcore poor among the households. Except for public safety and environmental quality, there were substantial improvements in working life, transport and communications, education, housing, culture and leisure due to better access to improved facilities and amenities (Malaysia 2001: 51). The NDP also succeeded in increasing the percentage of Bumiputera working in the competitive sectors, however a sizeable number of Bumiputera are still working in the agricultural sector. In terms of regional development, the economic divide between the more developed *negeri*, namely Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Selangor, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Johor and Perak, and the less developed *negeri* comprising Pahang, Kedah, Perlis, Terengganu, Sarawak, Kelantan and Sabah, has widened (Malaysia 2001: 55). In the context of Sarawak, there was a slight increase in terms of the central state's contribution to the development expenditure; from RM2,918 million (5.3 percent of the total central state development expenditure in Malaysia) in the Sixth Malaysia Plan to RM5,928 million (6.0 percent of the total central state development expenditure in Malaysia) in the Seventh Malaysia Plan. However, the slight increase in the central state's development expenditure failed to adequately provide Sarawakians with better standard of living. In fact, Sarawak along with several other *negeri* still lacked adequate basic amenities including piped-water and electricity supply (Malaysia 2001: 55).

With the conclusion of the NDP, a third long term economic plan known as the New Vision Policy (NVP) which constitutes the second development phase of the Vision 2020 was introduced. Under the NVP (2001-2010), two five-year economic plans were implemented, namely the Eighth Malaysia Plan (2001-2005) and the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010). Since the NEP and NDP had not fully attained their targets, the NVP incorporated the main objectives of the NEP, namely eradicating poverty and restructuring society, and the NDP, which emphasised balanced development (Malaysia 2001: 6). Apart from that, the NVP also introduced seven new policy thrusts; (1) building a resilient nation by fostering unity, (2) promoting an equitable society by eradicating poverty and reducing intra and inter-ethnic imbalances, (3) sustaining high economic growth by strengthening the sources of growth, the financial and corporate institutions as well as macroeconomic management, (4) enhancing competitiveness to meet the challenges of globalization and liberalization, (5) developing a knowledge-based economy in order to raise the value added of all economic sectors and optimising the brain power of the nation, (6) strengthening human resource development to produce competent, productive and knowledgeable work force, and (7) pursuing environmentally sustainable development (Malaysia 2001: 7-8). Unlike in the last four economic plans, the Eighth and the Ninth Malaysia Plan allocated a much bigger funding from the central state for various development programs in Sarawak with RM12,817 million (actual expenditure) and RM13,437 million (allocation only) respectively. In the Eighth Malaysia Plan, Sarawak's proportion of the central state's development expenditure increased

to 7.5 percent from 6.0 percent in the Seventh Malaysia Plan. However, Sarawak's share of the central state's development expenditure was reduced to 6.7 percent in the Ninth Malaysia Plan, albeit an absolute increase in the amount of funding allocated for the *negeri*.

In Sarawak, the agenda of development pursued by the central state was further boosted by the *negeri* leadership with the introduction of the "Politics of Development" (POD), a political-economic policy introduced by Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud in the early 1980s. The term POD has never been fully articulated by its creator. It is not a clearly defined policy with any specific measurable targets to be achieved. In fact, Taib contended that he gave the POD a loose definition, similar to the Vision 2020, so that the people could contribute to the interpretation and focus of the policy (Angkatan Zaman Mansang 2000: 43). To Taib, the POD is an 'ideology' which should be embraced by the people (Angkatan Zaman Mansang 2000: 43). Although there is no specific definition of the POD, this so-called 'ideology' basically incorporates a concept of total development which is not only measured in crude economic terms but also in terms of quality living (Angkatan Zaman Mansang 2000: 92). Development decisions, according to Taib, should be based on purely economic considerations and shall not be influenced by the politics of patronage and racial politics that had dominated Sarawak in the 1970s. However, contrary to the vision of POD, development has become a political tool of the state to dominate the electorate in Sarawak, especially the Muslim Bumiputera voters. This point will be deliberated in the following section.

DEVELOPMENT AS A TOOL OF DOMINATION

Development has long been the BN's main tool in rallying the support of the electorate in Malaysia. In every election, promises of new development projects would be pledged, ground breaking ceremonies for new projects would be carried out and completed projects would be grandiosely declared open. To further strengthen the ruling party's message that voting BN would mean voting for development projects, the party would punish the polling streams or constituencies or *negeri* that overwhelmingly voted for the opposition by depriving them of any new development projects. The exploitation of development, apart from other factors such as 3M (media, machinery, money), racial politics, gerrymandering, phantom voters and the opposition's inability to portray itself as a viable alternative, had effectively lured the electorate to the ruling party. As rightly pointed out by Abdul Rahman Embong (2008: 41), development has been exploited by the BN as a medium to forge 'a new national consensus and legitimacy' in replace of the goal of *merdeka* (independence) that 'had lost some of its luster and was no longer able to inspire unity'. In other words, the ruling party needed a new force to cajole the electorate and

development was powerful enough to play that role. Evidently, the ruling party managed to dominate both the parliamentary and *negeri* elections, except for a few *negeri* such as Kelantan, Sabah and Terengganu, since 1970 until 2004. However, the appeal of development has gradually declined especially among the urban voters in the Peninsula due to the contestation of other forces such as the appeal of participatory democracy, the call for social justice and the struggle for human rights. The manifestation of this gradual change from old politics to new politics was exhibited in the 8 March 2008 election results which presented a historic shift in Malaysian politics. Apart from denying the BN's two-third majority seat in Parliament, the coalition of opposition parties known as Pakatan Rakyat had surprisingly captured four *negeri* (Selangor, Perak, Kedah and Penang) and retained one (Kelantan). Popularly labelled as a tsunami by many political analysts, the March 8 elections challenged the perception that the BN could not be toppled through the ballot box and more importantly that development would continue to play an effective role in rallying the support of the electorate. This perception, however, still holds true in Sarawak.

In this largest *negeri* in Malaysia, the practice of politicising development has been the mainstay of the ruling party's effort to win electoral support since the 1960s. However, it is during the administration of current Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud that the practice of development politics "blossomed" to another level. Taking off from Aeria's (1997) work on the politics of development in the 1996 Sarawak *negeri* elections, this article further dissects the BN's practice of politicising development by looking at Sarawak government's expenditure on the Minor Rural Projects (MRPs) and the practice of electoral patronage espoused by the ruling party from 1970 to 2006. Based on this data, this article argues that the state's development agenda is strongly influenced by political agenda especially the continued dominance of the ruling party.

To demonstrate the state's agenda of politicising development in Sarawak, one should take a closer look at the *negeri* government's expenditure on the MRPs since 1970 until 2005. MRPs are "instant" development projects which are usually approved on the spot and require a shorter time period to complete. These "instant" projects are crucial to the ruling party since they offer tangible "carrots" that directly benefit the electorate. The types of "instant" project dished out by the state leaders are wide ranging. They include mini recreational facilities such as community parks and badminton courts; community based projects such as jetties, plank walks and community halls; infrastructure projects such as village roads, steel bridges, water and electricity supply; and house of worships such as mosques, temples and churches. Since 1970, the state's expenditure on the MRPs increased significantly during election years while during non-election years they would decline substantially (Table 1). This trend was clearly manifested in the first direct election in 1969 which was suspended due to the declaration of emergency (the election was resumed in the following year). Still, one can clearly see how the *negeri* government's expenditure on the

TABLE 1. Sarawak Government Expenditure on Minor Rural Projects,
1968-2005 (RM'000)

Year	Total Value of MRPs	Percentage Change in Total Value of MRPs
1968	46	-
1969	356	673.9
1970	471	32.3
1971	276	-41.4
1972	1,576	471.0
1973	139	-91.2
1974	922	563.3
1975	439	-52.4
1976	312	-28.9
1977	1,962	528.8
1978	2,500	27.4
1979	3,919	56.8
1980	2,342	-40.2
1981	3,113	32.9
1982	6,794	118.2
1983	10,064	48.1
1984	8,046	-20.1
1985	15,335	90.6
1986	42,762	178.9
1987	94,246	120.4
1988	60,528	-35.8
1989	93,142	53.9
1990	120,028	28.9
1991	143,424	19.5
1992	116,958	-18.5
1993	116,822	-0.1
1994	120,808	3.4
1995	115,972	-4.0
1996	134,743	16.2
1997	125,156	-7.1
1998	145,315	16.1
1999	172,378	18.6
2000	187,431	8.7
2001	210,082	12.1
2002	189,203	-9.9
2003	214,683	13.5
2004	185,657	-13.5
2005	103,992	-43.9

Notes:

- General elections – parliamentary and state elections
- Parliamentary elections
- State elections

Sources: Department of Statistics Malaysia, Sarawak (1965: 59-60), (1967: 66), (1971: 116), (1973: 113-114), (1977: 134), (1981: 170), (1984: 187-188), (1987: 154-155), (1991: 171-172), (1993: 186-187), (1994: 192-193), (1996: 186-187), (1998: 202-203), (2001: 220-221), (2005: 240-241)

MRPs in 1969 increased tremendously by a staggering 673.9 percent compared to the previous year. Despite dishing out a total of RM356,000 worth of development projects in 1969, the ruling party intensified its development agenda in the following year by further increasing it to RM471,000 or 32.3 percent increase. The state's strategic disbursement of MRPs during the election period persisted into the new millennium, albeit the change in leadership at the central state and Sarawak's government.

The politicisation of development via the MRPs became especially rampant after 1981 which marked the start of Taib's Chief Ministership. Between 1981 and 2005, the total expenditure of the MRPs increased significantly from RM3.1 million in 1981 to RM103.9 million in 2005. This strategy has definitely helped Taib in consolidating the electorate as evident from the ruling party's continued dominance in Sarawak elections. For example, during the hotly contested 1987 election, Taib survived the toughest test of his political career by dishing a total of RM94.2 million worth of development projects (120.4 percent increase from the previous year). Although his ruling party lost a historic 20 *negeri* seats (out of a total 48 seats) in the 1987 election, Taib managed to defeat a concerted plan by the opposition forces to topple him by dispensing many development projects to the electorate. Without a doubt, this strategy had definitely helped him to defeat the 1987's plot, allowing him to helm the *negeri* government for more than two decades.

After analysing the *negeri* government's expenditure on the MRPs between 1970 and 2005, this article will next discuss the practice of electoral patronage that has become an integral part of the politics of development in Sarawak. By analysing the practice of electoral patronage, one would be able to better understand how the ruling party politicises development, leading to a strong domination of Sarawak electorate for more than three decades.

Under the practice of electoral patronage espoused by the state, there are four strategies adopted in order to bind the electorate together (Table 2). First, during the campaign period, state ministers would pledge various new development projects in order to fish for votes. This is by far the most important part of the ruling party's electoral strategy as evident from the huge number of pledges made during the election period between 1970 and 2006. Among the development projects, the most popular projects dished out by the ruling party are the MRPs which are funded by the *negeri* and also the central governments. Some of these minor projects would be implemented on the spot while others would remain as empty promises.

The allocation of development projects during the election period varies according to the threat posed by the opposition in the constituencies concerned. Usually, only contested seats would be allocated new development projects as in the case of Ba'Kelalan, an Orang Ulu majority seat within the Limbang division at the northern part of Sarawak. The Ba'kelalan seat was created in 1996 but was never contested (it was won uncontested by the ruling party) until a by-election

TABLE 2. The Pledge and Distribution of Development Projects and Other 'Carrots' by the Ruling Party during Sarawak Elections, 1970-2006

Year	Pledges for various development projects		Issuance of financial grants and other "carrots" to individuals and social organizations		Official openings of completed development projects		Ground-breaking ceremonies of new development projects		Grand total of dev. projects and grants	Grand total cost of dev. projects and grants (RM million)
	Total	Cost (RM million)	Total	Cost (RM million)	Total	Cost (RM million)	Total	Cost (RM million)		
1970	8	22.30	1	0.03	2	0.03	0	0	11	22.36
1974	7	3.35	1	0.02	1	n.a.	0	0	9	3.36
1978	7	189.87	88	0.06	6	8.85	1	1.30	102	200.08
1979	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
1982	34	644.28	0	0	12	16.40	1	n.a.	47	660.68
1983	30	40.45	1	0.03	5	15.27	3	54.35	39	110.09
1986	8	620.54	10	0.68	7	28.99	1	0.80	26	651.01
1987	48	190.22	14	4.21	11	271.18	3	52.50	76	518.11
1990	9	2,024.40	7	0.55	3	2.91	2	11.40	21	2,039.25
1991	33	445.63	11	2.85	14	367.01	19	215.82	77	1,031.32
1995	42	180,663.07	50	1.24	17	465.82	6	13.75	115	181,143.87
1996	41	38,738.98	8	0.05	11	162.35	11	96.53	71	38,997.91
1999	31	168.42	198	150.75	11	127.35	24	153.73	264	600.25
2001	504	4,414.04	373	5.07	19	158.24	16	171.55	912	4,748.90
2004	20	641.50	308	101.22	15	427.12	9	217.15	352	1,386.99
2006	163	6,615.64	3,894	0.103	24	146.94	10	278.95	4,091	7,041.63

Notes:

1. The parliamentary and *negeri* elections in Sarawak were held simultaneously in 1970 and 1974. After that, both elections were held separately.
2. The subsequent parliamentary elections were held in 1978, 1982, 1986, 1990, 1995, 1999 and 2004. Meanwhile the *negeri* elections were held in 1979, 1983, 1987, 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2006.

Sources: Sarawak Tribune, Borneo Post, Berita Harian, Utusan Sarawak, Vanguard

was held in 2004 due to the unexpected death of its assemblyman. In the 2004 by-election, the seat saw a straight fight between an Independent and the ruling party. The most striking reality in Ba'kelalan is the slow pace of development in the area where even basic infrastructure such as tarred roads, water and electricity supplies are inadequately provided to the people (Sarawak Tribune 12 September 2004). With the possibility of losing the by-election, the ruling party decided to employ the strategy of electoral patronage in Ba'kelalan. During the campaign period, the ruling party promised to deliver not less than nine projects, worth more than RM97.2 million to the area (Berita Harian; Sarawak Tribune; Borneo Post; September 2004). This is the ugly face of Taib's development policy in

which development is being politicized and voters are punished for subscribing to opposing political views. Another important factor which can determine the allocation of development projects during the election period is the classification of the seat, whether it is a white, black or grey seat. A white seat is labelled as a safe seat to the ruling party, while a black seat implies that the opposition has a higher chance of winning. The third classification is a grey seat which denotes that both sides, the ruling party and the opposition, have equal chance of winning. In the 1991 election, for example, a total of RM50 million worth of development projects were allocated to the Batu Lintang seat (located in the heart of Kuching city) which saw an uphill battle for the ruling party. By using their access to the 3Ms (Media, Machinery, Money) and via promises of various development projects, the ruling party managed to win the black seat of Batu Lintang with a majority of 2,434 votes.

The second strategy of electoral patronage employed by the ruling party in Sarawak is the distribution of financial grants and other “carrots” to voters, religious bodies and other social organizations. This strategy started in the early 1970s and persisted into the new millennium. By disbursing financial assistance especially to religious and social organizations, the ruling party hopes that it would create a sense of gratitude and dependency among these organizations which then translates into votes. Beside financial grants, the ruling party also distributes other “carrots” which could be anything under the sun. For example, when the issue of land titles almost resulted in the defeat of the ruling party in several Muslim Bumiputera seats in the 1999 election, the ruling party acted swiftly by issuing land titles to the electorate. After the 1999 election, more land titles were awarded especially among the Kuching Malays in order to lure back their support. Suddenly, land titles became hot electoral ‘commodities’ which irresponsibly being traded to the electorate in exchange for their votes.

Money is another powerful “carrot” which being widely distributed during the election period. Money politics can take many forms. When migrating voters return home to vote, political parties or their agents would give money to these voters as a token to compensate the expenses that they incur while coming back home to vote. In other cases, political parties or their agents would enclose certain amount of money (ranging from as little as RM10 to as high as RM100) to the voting slip (containing information about the voters’ polling stations) that they distribute to voters several days before polling. Within the Muslim Bumiputera seats, some Muslim campaigners even resorted to the use of the holy Quran to coerce voters who had received money to vote for them (Abang Yusuf 1999: 41). Although the legal expenditure for election campaign in Malaysia had been increased from RM30,000 to RM100,000 for a *negeri* seat and from RM50,000 to RM200,000 for a parliamentary seat, the amount of money spent by the ruling party for every constituency still exceeded the permitted amount. In the hotly contested 1987 election, the Chief Minister estimated the cost of his campaign as between RM300,000 to RM500,000 per constituency (Leigh 1991:

192). Meanwhile it was alleged that an estimated RM2 million per constituency was spent by the BN in the 1991 election (Aeria 2005: 133). The ruling party is not the only party guilty of practicing money politic, in fact the opposition could also resort to the practice of vote buying, provided they have the financial resources to do so. In the 1987 election, for example, a former opposition leader admitted that some of the opposition candidates spent several millions in their constituencies in order to challenge the ruling party (Hafsah Harun 2007). Although these claims lack strong factual support, one should not brush aside the existence of money politics during the elections. So far, the strongest evidence to prove that money politics existed in Sarawak was the 1996 election in Bukit Begunan which saw the Kuching High Court declared the election as null and void due to vote-buying. In the Bukit Begunan case, the plaintiff, Donald Lawan who was the Independent candidate for Bukit Begunan, claimed that on 5 September 1996, RM10 notes were being distributed to the voters who attended a function in Lachau, Sri Aman, organised for the respondent, Mong Dagang who was the ruling party's candidate for the constituency. Donald also stated that on 6 September 1996, Tuai Rumah Radin anak Tungang of Rumah Radin, Sri Aman received a sum of RM5,580 from the respondent in order to lure the Tuai Rumah and his longhouse residents to vote for Mong (Sarawak Tribune 14 February 1997).

The practice of money politics is still rampant in Sarawak and the Bukit Begunan case is a testimony to this. As long as politicians continue to be corrupt, the true meaning of election which intends to elect responsible and visionary leaders to lead the country would not be materialized. In fact, the whole practice of electoral patronage espoused by the state has hampered the progress of democracy and the emergence of civic-minded citizen in Sarawak. The politicisation of development has clearly impeded the discourse on much more important issues such as good governance, social justice, economic equality, transparency and the increasing crime rate in the country.

The BN accentuates its development success by holding "official opening ceremonies" for its completed projects. This is the ruling party's third strategy of electoral patronage. The number of development projects being officially opened during the election period had increased from at least two functions in 1970 to more than 24 functions in 2005. Some of the projects had been completed several years prior to the elections but declared open only during the campaign period. In some cases, the same project would be declared open more than once by different ministers or political leaders. A grandiose affair attended by ministers, community leaders, government officers, party supporters, local populace and the mass media, this 'official opening ceremony' is intended to remind voters that only the ruling party can bring progress. These official ceremonies (including the 'ground-breaking ceremonies') are also the ruling party's strategy to win the psychological war against the opposition ahead of polling day. By boasting huge attendance in these functions, the ruling party can claim early victory

against its rival. The ruling party can go to the extreme by ferrying “imported” attendees such as university students, government workers and villagers from other localities just to boost the number. These functions will then be featured in news bulletin and special programs over the national television and radio apart from the mainstream newspapers as part of the ruling party’s electoral campaign.

The fourth and final strategy of electoral patronage involves the holding of ‘ground-breaking ceremonies’ in order to announce the commencement of new projects. Similar like ‘official opening ceremonies’, the ‘ground-breaking ceremonies’ have the same ultimate goal that is to indoctrinate the voters, that development is synonymous with the ruling party. As a result, development becomes the ideology of the people of Sarawak, making it an integral part of their life. To further accentuate the ruling party’s role in bringing new development projects to the electorate, billboards declaring that these new projects belong to the government would be erected at the site of the projects, again intended to remind the voters that the ruling party is the one to be credited. In the early 1970s, the number of ‘ground-breaking ceremonies’ held by the ruling party was considered small but this figure rose tremendously to at least 9 in 2004 and 10 in 2006.

Between 1990 and 2006, the ruling party had intensified its development propaganda by pledging an average of 110 new projects and handed out an average of 108 financial grants and other ‘carrots’. Apart from that, the ruling party also held an average of 13 ‘official opening ceremonies’ and 13 ‘ground-breaking ceremonies’ within the corresponding period. Whereas in the 1980s, the average number of ‘opening ceremonies’ and ‘ground breaking ceremonies’ held by the ruling party was two and 30 respectively. The number of new projects being pledged by the ruling party and the number of financial grants and other ‘carrots’ being handed out was also much lower within the same period; an average of 30 new projects and six financial grants and other ‘carrots’. By looking at the trend of electoral patronage in Sarawak, it is clear that this practice will continue to increase in terms of its importance as evident from the increasing number of development projects, financial grants and other ‘carrots’ being distributed to the electorate since the 1970 election. Throughout Rahman (Taib’s uncle and also Sarawak’s third Chief Minister) and later Taib’s tenure as Sarawak Chief Minister, development has become a political tool to dominate the electorate as evident from the ruling party’s sterling performance in the elections except for the 1987 election.

DEVELOPMENT: WHITHER THE PEOPLE’S AGENDA?

Despite the ruling party’s strategy of politicising development, Sarawak still achieve rapid progress with its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (at factor cost) growing steadily from RM438 million in 1961 to RM860 million in 1970 (current

prices), an average growth rate of over seven percent per annum. For the period between 1971 to 1980, Sarawak's GDP (at factor cost) continued to grow from RM909 million (in constant 1970 prices) in 1971 to RM2,980 million (in constant 1978 prices) in 1980, again representing an annual growth rate of about seven percent (Hamid 1988: 49). Growth performance during 1981-1985 was somewhat curbed as a result of adverse global economic conditions. Still, Sarawak's GDP (at factor cost) grew from RM1,474 million in 1981 (in constant 1970 prices) to RM6,948 million (in constant 1978 prices) in 1990, recording a staggering annual growth rate of 18.6 percent. In the late 1990s, Malaysia was again hit by an economic crisis which also affected Sarawak. Overall, Sarawak still recorded a tremendous growth in the 1990s when its GDP (at factor cost) grew from RM10,941 million (in constant 1987 prices) in 1991 to RM17,522 in 2000 (in constant 1987 prices). Sarawak's per capita income also registered a rising trend over the last 30 years. Within the corresponding period, per capita income of the *negeri* rose from RM881 in 1970 (in constant 1970 prices) to RM12,755 (in constant 1987 prices) in 2000 (Table 3).

However, some scholars have questioned whether the rapid economic growth in Sarawak has brought prosperity to the people as a whole (Berma 2003; Wee 1995). First, it is argued that the economic growth has not structurally changed the economy because of its continued reliance on the primary sector particularly mining and forest industry. Since 1970, the primary sector had long been the mainstay of Sarawak's economy with agriculture, forestry and mining as the leading contributors to the GDP. In 1970, these three sectors collectively contributed 37 percent to the GDP and continued to be the major contributor until the early 1980s (Table 3). Initially, agriculture was by far the most important of the three sectors (with rubber, pepper and sago flour as the major exports), followed by forestry. Still, saw logs and sawn timber exports (at current prices) from Sarawak increased from RM5 million in 1951 to RM3,135 million in 1990 (Wee Chong Hui 1995: 76). Since timber industry is export-oriented, it does not generate much benefit to the *negeri*. Although the timber industry provides employment, much of the profits generated by the industry go to timber licensees (Wee Chong Hui 1995: 76). Worst, timber concessions became a source of political patronage to the ruling party which then led to the emergence of "instant" Bumiputera millionaires who were mostly the family members, friends and political supporters of the Chief Minister (Alli 1988: 119).

During the first half of the 1970s, the relative contribution of agriculture and forestry declined following expansion in other sectors, notably mining. By 1983, mining became the biggest single contributor to Sarawak's GDP (Hamid 1988: 52). This trend continued to persist into the new millennium. In 2004, the export of crude petroleum and Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) from Sarawak totalled RM28,288 million or 63 percent of Sarawak's GDP (Department of Statistics Malaysia, Sarawak 2005: 153). Akin to the timber industry, the oil and petroleum industries also do not contribute much to the people of Sarawak since the

TABLE 3. Sarawak Gross Domestic Product by Kind of Economic Activity at Constant Prices, 1970-2000 (RM million)

	1970		1980		1990		2000		
Agriculture, forestry, livestock and fishing	319	37.1	824	27.7	1,679	24.2	2,613	14.9	
Mining and quarrying	30	3.5	739	24.8	1,855	27.1	5,543	31.6	
Manufacturing	81	9.4	257	8.6	1,170	16.8	3,843	21.9	
Construction	46	5.3	195	6.5	278	4.0	479	2.7	
Electricity, gas and water	11	1.3	40	1.3	129	1.8	403	2.3	
Transport, storage and communications	56	6.5	122	4.1	344	4.9	981	5.6	
Wholesale and retail trade, hotels and restaurants	116	13.5	279	9.4	560	8.0	1,377	8.0	
Finance, insurance, real estate and business services	66	7.7	180	6.0	322	4.6	621	3.5	
Government services	45	5.2	296	10.0	554	7.9	1,138	6.5	
Other services	90	10.5	48	1.6	57	0.8	524	3.0	
GDP at factor cost	Sarawak	860	100.0	2,980	100.0	6,948	100.0	17,522	100.0
	Malaysia	10,708		43,510		80,151		218,658	
GDP at purchasers value	Sarawak	n.a.		3,097		6,857		17,444	
	Malaysia	n.a.		44,702		79,103		209,269	
Per capita GDP	Sarawak	881 (8)		2,292 (10)		3,883 (7)		12,755 (9)	
	Malaysia	994		3,221		4,392		14,584	

Notes:

1. The GDP for 1970 is based on the current prices while the GDP for 1980 and 1990 are based on the constant prices of 1978.
2. The GDP for 2000 is based on the constant prices of 1987.
3. Figures in () represent ranking among *negeri* for the year.

Sources: Malaysia (2001: 35), (1991: 124-125), (1986: 172), (1976: 12), Department of Statistics Malaysia, Sarawak (2005: 229)

industries are predominantly foreign-owned and capital-intensive, generating relatively few employment opportunities (Wee Chong Hui 1995: 80). Furthermore, Sarawak only receives five percent of the petroleum revenue thus losing a substantial amount of development funding for the *negeri*.

Second, some scholars argue that the rapid economic growth in Sarawak has failed to address the issue of equitable growth or balanced development. Although development is closely associated with economic growth, the two are not synonymous since in many cases rapid economic growth has been associated with rising unemployment, growing inequality and an increased

incidence of absolute poverty, as well as increased fragmentation of society and environmental degradation (Cramb & Dixon 1988: 1). Thus, economic growth should address the issue of equitable growth which according to Cramb and Dixon (1988: 1), refers to the process of economic growth which would enhance the poorest sector of the population. In the case of Sarawak, the poorest sector of the population is the rural populace who is made up of the Bumiputera communities, especially the non-Muslim Bumiputera.

In his speech at a symposium held at the University of Malaya in 1962, Sarawak's Information Officer, Alistair Morrison, emphasised that "...rural development is the key to making Sarawak a strong, stable and reliable partner in Malaysia..." (Ho Ah Chon 1991: 31). Morrison's concern of rural development was understandable since more than two third of the population in Sarawak at that time lived in the rural areas, working in the agricultural sector (including fishery and forestry). Thus, it was vital for the *negeri* to develop the primary sector in order to uplift the livelihood of the people in the rural areas throughout Sarawak. Initially, a total of RM86.7 million or about 32 percent of the total development expenditure for Sarawak under the First Malaysia Plan (1966-1970) was spent on agriculture and rural development (Malaysia 1971: 68-71). However, with Malaysia's drive towards industrialisation, the state's economic focus changed drastically, leading to the marginalisation of the primary sector and also the rural population. In the Third Malaysia Plan (1976-1980), the percentage of the public sector's expenditure on agriculture and rural development in Sarawak was reduced dramatically to a mere eight percent (Malaysia 1971: 68-71; 1976: 431). Unfortunately, about 56 percent of Sarawak population in 1980 was still employed in the primary sector. As a result, the government was criticised for neglecting rural development and for adopting an urban-bias type of development, thus marginalising the non-Muslim Bumiputera which formed the largest rural population (Leigh 1980: 243). The declining trend in the expenditure of the agricultural sector continued into the new millennium. In 2004, only 2.9 percent of the total development expenditure incurred by Sarawak government was allocated for agriculture, leaving the rural population (about 52 percent in 2000), who were mostly involved in this sector, in a state of quandary (Department of Statistics Malaysia Sarawak 2005: 22).

Apart from failing to address the issue of rural-urban inequality, the state-led development has also resulted in inter-ethnic inequality. Madeline Berma (2003: 250) argued that the NEP and NDP only benefited the Malays and the Chinese, while the non-Muslim Bumiputera communities, especially the Ibans, were marginalised. Although Sarawak's mean monthly household income was at RM427 in 1976, about 41.5 percent of the households received less than RM200 a month. Comparatively, 65.3 percent of the Ibans, 64.9 percent of the Bidayus, 51.4 percent of the Melanaus, 31.5 percent of the Malays and 14.8 percent of the Chinese earned less than RM200 in 1975 (Berma 2003: 228). Clearly a large section of the Bumiputera communities earned less than the non Bumiputera community.

However, there were also differences within the Bumiputera communities with the Ibans and the Bidayuhs in the worst off positions.

When the NEP officially came to an “end” in 1990, Sarawak’s mean monthly household income had increased significantly to RM1,208 which were higher than the national figure of RM1,167 (Table 4). Correspondingly, the mean monthly household income of various ethnic groups in Sarawak increased tremendously. In 1990, the mean monthly household income of the Chinese was RM1,754, followed by the Malays with RM1,332, the Melanaus with RM951, the Bidayuhs with RM833 and the Ibans with RM710 (Berma 2003: 232). Again, the non-Muslim Bumiputera communities earned less than the rest of the population in Sarawak. Several factors might have contributed to the displacement of the non-Muslim Bumiputera during the NEP period. Among others, (1) the NEP was conceived by the Malay leaders in United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), the leading party at the central government, without much consultation with the people of Sarawak, especially from the non-Muslim Bumiputera communities, (2) the NEP’s ultimate objective was to address inter rather than intra-ethnic inequality and (3) the problem of classifying the indigenous communities of Sarawak into the Bumiputera category which made them invisible over the economically advanced Malays (Berma 2003: 251-252). The marginalisation of the non-Muslim Bumiputera gave rise to Dayakism, a slogan used in the 1980s and 1990s in order to rally the support of the community against the government led by the Muslim-Bumiputera leaders. According to Mason and Jawan (2003: 190), although the state’s economic policies, particularly the NEP, aimed at uplifting the Bumiputera communities, the Dayaks felt that they were being treated as a second-class Bumiputera. In the Eighth Malaysia Plan (2001-2005), the state acknowledged the displacement of the non-Muslim Bumiputera in Sarawak (and Sabah), and reassured that “special efforts” would be taken to address the issues of development among the minority Bumiputera groups, particularly the non-Muslim Bumiputera (Mason & Jawan 2003: 183).

When the NEP ‘ended’ in 1990, a new long term economic policy called the NDP was introduced. Under the NDP, Sarawak’s mean monthly income was further increased to RM2,276 in 1999. However, in comparison to other *negeri*, Sarawak

TABLE 4. Sarawak and Malaysia: Mean Monthly Household Income
(in current prices), 1976-2007

		1976	1990	1999	2004	2007
Mean monthly	Sarawak	427	1,208	2,276	2,725	3,349
haousehold income		(n.a.)	(4)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(RM)	Malaysia	505	1,167	2,472	3,249	3,686

Notes:

1. Figures in () represent Sarawak’s ranking among the *negeris* in Malaysia.

Sources: Malaysia (2006: 358), (2001: 143), (1996: 149) and Ragayah Mat Zin (2008)

was ranked sixth and its mean monthly income was way below the national figure of RM2,472. Still, Sarawak's mean household income continued to increase to RM2,725 in 2004, but its position among the other *negeri* declined further to seventh place, a rank lower than in 1999. Three years later, Sarawak's mean household income continued to grow to RM3,349 which was slightly lower than the national figure. However, Sarawak's position among the other *negeri* continued to slide when it was ranked eight overall. Although, there is no available data on the mean household income of various ethnic groups in Sarawak for the corresponding years, it is fair to suggest that inter-ethnic inequalities would have widened within this period.

Another aspect of inter-ethnic inequalities in Sarawak can be traced by analysing the poverty level of the population. Under the NEP, the incidence of poverty in Malaysia was significantly reduced from 42.4 percent in 1976 to 17.1 percent in 1990 (Table 5). At the end of the NDP period, the poverty level in Malaysia was further reduced to 7.5 percent in 1999. During the middle of the NVP period, the level of poverty in Malaysia was further reduced to 5.7 percent. In the corresponding period, Sarawak also managed to reduce its poverty level. Under the NEP, Sarawak managed to reduce its incidence of poverty from a staggering 56.5 percent in 1976 to 21.0 percent in 1990. The level of poverty in Sarawak was further reduced to 6.7 percent in 1999, 7.5 percent in 2004 and 4.2 percent in 2007. In comparison to other *negeri*, Sarawak was still considered to be among the *negeri* with the highest rate of poverty in Malaysia even though it had drastically reduced its poverty level. In 1976, Sarawak was ranked sixth among the *negeri* with the highest level of poverty in the country and its position became worst in 2004 when it was ranked fourth (Table 5). The significant decline in Sarawak's incidence of poverty in 2007 saw the *negeri* clawed back to fifth position. Although the level of poverty in Sarawak had declined significantly, the inter-ethnic dimension of poverty was still high. In 1976, it was estimated that 74.9 percent of the Bidayuh households, 71.5 percent of the Iban households, 64.1 percent of the Melanau households, 48.5 percent of the Malay households and 21.1 percent of the non-Bumiputera households were classified as poor. Based on these figures, more than half of the Bumiputera households were poor

TABLE 5. Sarawak and Malaysia: Incidence of Poverty, 1976-2007

Year		1976	1990	1999	2004	2007
Incidence of poverty (%)	Sarawak	56.5 (6)	21.0 (5)	6.7 (6)	7.5 (4)	4.2 (5)
	Malaysia	42.4	17.1	7.5	5.7	3.6

Notes:

1. Figures in () represent Sarawak's ranking among the *negeris* in Malaysia.

Sources: Malaysia (2006: 358), (2001: 143), (1996: 71), (1986: 88), (1991b: 46-52) and Ragayah Mat Zin (2008)

but the non-Muslim Bumiputera households, especially the Bidayuhs and the Ibans, were worst off. At the end of the NEP, 36.4 percent of the Iban, 33 percent of the Melanau and 25.8 percent of the Bidayuh households were still poor. In contrast, only 16.5 percent of the Malay and 4.3 percent of the Chinese households were classified as poor. In fact, the incidence of poverty among the Ibans and the Melanaus were among the highest in Malaysia (1990) as compared to other ethnic groups (Kadazan 49.5 percent, Murut 46 percent, Bajau 34.4 percent) (Berma 2003: 221-227). The disparity within the non-Muslim Bumiputera communities further fortified their claims of being marginalized by the state's development policies. Interestingly, the Melanaus do not benefit much from their leaders who dominate the *negeri*, since a significant number of this community is still considered poor.

After more than three decades of politicising development, the ruling party has successfully embedded the culture of developmentalism in Sarawak's society, making it almost impossible for the opposition parties which do not have access to these political 'goods' to unseat the ruling party. Paradoxically, the politics of development has triggered a wave of contestation by a small number of Malay and Dayak groups who criticise the ruling party's development policies as being urban-biased and pro-Muslim Melanau's cronies. The importance of development politics in Sarawak would persist for many decades to come as the pace of development in the *negeri* is still much to be desired. As long as development is scarce, it would remain as a priceless 'commodity' which the ruling party could effectively exploit as a tool to remain in power.

CONCLUSION

Leigh (1979: 371) noted that politics in the post Independence Sarawak is essentially concerned with the control of land, timber and minerals. This selfish quest leads to conflicts of interests that can be expressed in crude communal terms (Leigh 1979: 371-372). However, with the introduction of the NEP in 1970 and subsequently two other long-term economic policies (NDP and NVP), Sarawak politics has now being dominated by the distribution of state rents, particularly development projects. The state leaders in Sarawak have capitalised on the resources available from these economic policies and drafted their own economic vision which is intended to dominate the electorate. By offering development projects, financial grants and other 'carrots' including cash, the ruling party has been able to subdue the majority of Sarawak electorate, especially the Muslim Bumiputera voters. As long as the ruling party can continue to provide the electorate's materialistic needs, they will continue to vote for the party.

The Sarawak ruling party's dominance over the electorate, however, is not absolute. The ruling party's development policies have been constantly contested by various groups in Sarawak who are not satisfied with the type of

development that the state has embarked. These contesting forces have been challenging the ruling party on the basis of democratic principles and ethno-nationalism. However, the influence of developmentalism among the electorate continues to persist, thus making it difficult for other pressing issues like social justice and democratic ideals to penetrate the electorate.

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