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- Sweden
- 00. Editorial
- United States
- Latin America
- Egypt
- Jordan
- Yemen
- Thailand

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- 2010/11 2010/12 2011/01
- 2011/02 2011/03 2011/04
- 2011/05 2011/06 2011/07
- 2011/08

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- 66 72 73 75 79 85 86 87
- 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95
- 96 97 98 99 00 01 02 03
- 04 05 06 07 08 09 10

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- J K L M N O P Q
- R S T U V W Y Z

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- I J K L M N O P
- Q R S T U V W X
- Y Z

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Viewing cable 09KUALALUMPUR886, SARAWAK: NATIONAL FRONT'S "SAFE DEPOSIT" SECURE

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 000886

SIPDIS
E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PGOV ECON MY
SUBJECT: SARAWAK: NATIONAL FRONT'S "SAFE DEPOSIT" SECURE FOR NOW

Â¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: An October 12-14 visit by Pol counselor to Sarawak -- known as a ruling National Front's (BN) "safe deposit" because BN can count on retaining political control of its 31-member Parliamentary delegation -- reinforced the view that Sarawak remains firmly in the ruling coalition's hands. On BN's side of the ledger, Chief Minister Taib Mahmud remains unchallenged after 27 years in office, his government doles out timber-cutting permits while patrolling the under-developed state using 14 helicopters, and his family's companies control much of the economy. On the opposition side, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) holds only one Parliamentary seat and is quarreling with the People's Justice Party (PKR), which has none, while the Peoples Islamic Party (PAS) lacks any presence in Sarawak at all. BN interlocutors expressed confidence, and opposition interlocutors did not dispute, that BN would retain overwhelming control of the state in the next state elections, to be held by 2011, and beyond. END SUMMARY.

Â¶2. (SBU) PolCouns and PolSpecialist visited the East Malaysian (Borneo) state of Sarawak, known for its extensive, endangered rainforests and its diverse indigenous population, during October 12-14. The state, geographically the largest among the 13 states in Malaysia with a population of only 2 million, is politically significant for the ruling National Front (BN) because it is seen as guaranteeing the BN's majority in Parliament. In the March 2008 general election, for example, BN needed the 30 seats it won in Sarawak to ensure its majority in Parliament (Note: BN captured 140 out of 222 seats; 110 would have left it short of a majority. End Note.) Neighboring Sabah's 24 BN seats were critical too. Hence, Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak has described the two states as the BN's "safe deposits." Acknowledging East Malaysia's political significance, on October 19 Prime Minister Najib declared September 16, the day Sarawak and Sabah joined the Federation of Malaya to form Malaysia, to be a national public holiday as of 2010.

Federal Government Giving Millions

Â¶3. (SBU) On October 12, PolCouns and PolSpecialist met Sarawak Deputy Chief Minister George Chan, who is also President of the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP), which is Sarawak's version of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). During the meeting at his newly built mansion next to Kuching's most exclusive golf course, Chan said that since the March 2008 general election, the Federal Government has been "pouring millions of ringgit" for development into the state. He described the allocation as a form of "gratitude" to the Sarawak state government for "delivering the seats to secure the BN's majority at the Federal level." Chan noted that preserving Sarawak's rainforests was an important international issue for Malaysia, but said that the state government was also under pressure to develop the state, including building roads to remote longhouses. Development meant more logging and palm oil plantations.

Â¶4. (SBU) At a separate meeting on October 12, United Traditional Bumiputra Party (PBB) Supreme Council Member and Member of Parliament Wan Junaidi agreed that since the March 2008 general election, the Federal government "has been generous" in providing funds to the state. He acknowledged that Sarawak's role as a "kingmaker" in national politics had significantly increased its importance in the eyes of Federal leaders. Furthermore, the staunch loyalty shown to the BN by the 30 BN Sarawakian Members of Parliament, some of whom were

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courage is contagious

initially rumored to have agreed to crossover to the opposition People's Alliance (PR), has also boosted Sarawak's BN fortunes.

¶5. (SBU) Chan and Junaidi said the BN's ability to deliver a large number of Parliament seats was due to Sarawak Chief Minister Taib Mahmud's (who has held the chief minister's post since 1981) "iron grip" on the state. (Note: Taib's son is married to one of Chan's daughters. End Note.) Furthermore the state's control over immigration (one of the significant issues negotiated when Sarawak joined the Federation) also helped keep "opposition troublemakers" out of Sarawak. (Note: Several opposition leaders including Democratic Action Party (DAP) senior advisor Lim Kit Siang, People's Justice Party (PKR) leaders and Members of Parliament Sivarasa Rasiah and Gopalakrishnan have recently been refused entry into the state. End Note.)

Opposition in Disarray in Sarawak

¶6. (SBU) While BN holds all the cards, the opposition's DAP and PKR are weak and in disarray in Sarawak, both BN and opposition interlocutors told us. In the March 2008 general election, Sarawak was the only state where the opposition

KUALA LUMP 0000886 002 OF 002

failed to reach a consensus on which party would compete for which seats, to avoid splitting the opposition votes, and the issue remains open for state elections to be held by 2011. (Note: opposition leaders are expecting the next state election to be held in the latter part of 2010. Sarawak is the only state which does not hold both state and parliamentary elections simultaneously, for historical reasons. End Note.) In addition, DAP and PKR state representatives have filed several defamation suits against each other in the state, in each case resulting in unhelpful media reports.

¶7. (SBU) In an October 13 meeting, the sole DAP Member of Parliament from Sarawak, Chong Chieng Jen, in his mid-thirties, saw DAP's upside potential in future elections as limited. He shared Deputy Chief Minister Chan's view that the opposition coalition might only win 10 to 11 seats, up from 9 now, in the next state election, leaving the opposition with a fraction of the 71 state seats. Furthermore, Chong expected DAP to win only one or two additional seats at the Parliament level in the next national elections (to be held by early 2013), because BN controls the resources and airwaves. In addition, internet penetration, crucial for the opposition, since the government-controlled media rarely covers opposition politicians, is very low in Sarawak (estimated to be around 13.6 percent in 2008). He also downplayed the possibility that the Peoples Alliance coalition would come up with a common platform in December that would heal the rifts between the opposition parties in Sarawak, noting sarcastically, "What common platform. Such platforms are only for the peninsula."

PKR Sees Potential in Sarawak

¶8. (SBU) Also on October 13, PKR Central Committee members Baru Bian (since named as PKR Liaison Chief for Sarawak) and Baharuddin Moksini lamented the opposition's inability to reach voters, even though the one million indigenous people (collectively called "Dayaks") could amount to a powerful bloc supporting the opposition, since they oppose rampant logging. Moksini said that even when the opposition parties managed to rent a helicopter during the Batang Ai district of Sarawak by-election in April, the state government refused to give their helicopter landing rights.

¶9. (SBU) Nonetheless PKR leaders were more optimistic than DAP's Chong that the March 2008 "political tsunami" that hit the Peninsula could sweep Sarawak in the next state election. Bian said that the people are fed up with Taib's 27-year administration, seen as only enriching his family and a small coterie of cronies. Baharuddin explained that in Sarawak only three companies, Chahaya Mata Sarawak (which locals jokingly claim stands for "Chief Minister's Sons"), Naim Cendera Holdings and Titanium Management Berhad, all associated with the Chief Minister's family, are the only "big players in the state." All major contracts and a significant portion of land to be converted to palm oil plantations (including on indigenous "customary rights lands" that the state government has refused to recognize) are given to these three companies.

KEITH