Lawyer-cum-politician Baru Bian has chosen a path seldom travelled. In that time, he has taken the fight for the rights of the Sarawak natives to their customary lands to the highest level—and won. What makes this man tick?

BY ANNA CHIDAMBAR

A state as vast and sparsely populated as Sarawak, Baru Bian is a household name. He juggles between two major roles—as a prominent lawyer fighting for the rights of Sarawak’s natives, and as a savvy politician representing the people of Ba’Kelalan in the Sarawak state assembly. He is also the Sarawak chairman of Parti Keadilan Rakyat, and helped to spearhead the opposition party’s attempt to get a foothold in the state.

During a recent meeting with The Heat, Baru is philosophical about Pakatan Rakyat’s loss in the recent Balingian state by-election. He concedes that it is a Barisan Nasional stronghold, but admits the choice of candidate could have also contributed to Pakatan’s defeat.

The seat fell vacant when former Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud resigned to take up the post of Yang Di-Pertua Negri of the state. Former Dalat district officer Yussibnosh Balo retained the seat for Barisan with a majority of 6,911. He garnered 8,194 votes against PKR candidate Abdul Jalil Bujang’s 1,283.

Baru takes the loss in his stride, insisting that it is only a temporary setback for the party and part of a continuous learning process. He knows all about disappointment and facing challenges, having survived trials and tribulations growing up, all of which has made him the leader that he is today.

“My growing up years were very tough and the experiences were instrumental in shaping my life and philosophy,” he says.

Early childhood

Baru is a Lun Bawang, formerly known as the Muruts of Sarawak. “Constitutionally we are called the Lun Bawangs,” he explains.

The Muruts of Sarawak are different from the Muruts of Sabah. “That is why we prefer to be called Lun Bawangs,” Baru adds. He comes from a longhouse in Long Kerebangan in the Lawas district, close to the border with Brunei and Sabah.

Baru, 56, a father of two boys and a girl, grew up in a strictly religious family. His father, Bian Labo, was one of the first trained pastors of the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) church. His mother was a housewife.

History has it that Lun Bawangs were once the poorest and most despised tribes in Sarawak, perpetually drunk on rice wine and nearly wiped out by disease due to appalling living conditions in the early 1900s.

Perhaps it was divine intervention, or it was sudden awareness of their dire condition, but the Lun Bawangs later experienced a significant social change. Within five years, they became the most progressive tribe in Sarawak, a change apparently initiated by the arrival of the missionaries from Australia.

At the age of 18, Bian enrolled in a Bible school. But he got married before he could finish his studies. He later resumed his studies and became a full-fledged pastor three years later.

Bian was a staunch Christian and a pious man who was respected by the villagers. The man lived by one of the Lun Bawang sayings that children—Baru and his seven siblings—had to behave themselves as they carried their father’s name.

Another saying his father took to heart was “to do what is right and people will fear you”. This struck a chord with Baru, apart from Christian teachings to be upright and just.

Despite childhood adversities, or perhaps because of them, Baru and his siblings have proven successful in their individual career choices. Besides Baru
the lawyer, also in the family are a matron, teacher, banker, lab technician, pastor and geologist.

As expected, Baru and his siblings had a strict Christian upbringing. "My father used to wake us up at 5am for morning devotion," he recalls.

Baru's childhood was spent in districts his father was posted to in his role as pastor. He has lived in the Kelabit Highlands of Pa Main, in Bario, Pa Tik, Long Lalang, and in Ulu Baram where he attended primary school.

Living with the bare minimum
Financially, Baru's family was always hard-pressed for cash. As a pastor, his father earned only RM5 per month. This was later raised to RM30 and then RM50 a month.

"It was very challenging for my parents, especially at the beginning of the year since there were three of us at school at any one time. I still remember at the beginning of the year it cost at least RM100 per person. My parents had to borrow money from relatives just to get the things we needed for school."

Baru even wore his sister's school shirt as a hand-me-down as there was no money to buy new uniforms. Most of the other Lun Bawang children, coming from poor families as well, were similarly disadvantaged.

One of the things that helped build their character was the fact that they were in a boarding school where they learned responsibility at an early age.

"About 70 children would leave Long Semadon on Sunday and return the next Friday afternoon. In primary school, we had to carry our own parang and fetch firewood for the school mother to cook our food for the week, so every boy had to have a parang to go to school. We also had to take our ration of rice to school and we would travel by ourselves," says Baru.

Baru's difficult childhood prepared him early for independence and leadership. He was a prefect at school, just like all his siblings. When he was in Sixth Form in a college in Miri, he also taught history, art, physical education and general science to students in Forms One to Three.

Baru took his Diploma in Law in 1981 at UiTM on a twinning programme with Melbourne University where he met his wife, Yu Ching Sieu, who was studying there. Yu, now 53, was from Bintulu.

After completing his degree, Baru did his nine-month chambering in Kuala Lumpur in 1986 at Rashid and Lee and later at Eddy Chung and Co before returning to Kuching in 1988. He joined Anthony Ting and Co Solicitors.

In 1991, he made his first foray into the political world by standing for election for the Lawas seat under the Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS) banner. Though he lost, he went up the ranks in the party, serving as vice-president and supreme council member.

In 2004, he resigned from PBDS and stood as an Independent candidate in the Ba'Kelalan by-election and lost by about 1300 votes. He tried his luck again in May 2006, standing as a SNAP candidate in the Ba'Kelalan state constituency in the Sarawak state election and lost by 475 votes.

Disillusioned after three failed attempts, Baru skipped the 2008 general election; yet the results became one of the main reasons he returned to politics. Three months after the election, an offer was made to him to join PKR which he accepted.

He joined PKR in April 2008 and was appointed party state chairman in November 2009. He was also appointed to the PKR Political Bureau & Supreme Council.

In the April 2011 state elections, Baru finally wrested the Ba'Kelalan seat for PKR by beating his nephew Willie Liau by 473-vote majority but suffered another setback in his quest to make it to Parliament when he lost the Limbang seat in the 2013 general election.
Landmark NCR land victories

LAWYER Baru Bian’s path to prominence in native customary rights (NCR) land issues began at a very personal level. In 1990, his family’s land was trespassed and encroached upon. That was what prompted him to take up the fight that has now led to a series of victories for the natives.

His breakthrough came on May 12, 2001, in the landmark case of Nor Anak Nyawai. In that case, the High Court ruled that NCR land was not only felled and cultivated land but also included primary forest areas.

“The landmark case not only described and affirmed our understanding of the law, it also confirmed that the common law principle is recognised in other jurisdictions and commonwealth countries of the world,” he says. “Following Nor Anak Nyawai, we won at least 10 cases after full trial, and at least seven cases in the Court of Appeal.”

On prospects for the future Baru says:

“Now that I have three young lawyers in the firm and my colleague See Chee How, I can dedicate more time to politics as I believe things will change through the power of politics.

“I have been fighting and have won a lot of cases in court but somehow they are hollow wins as we can’t change the position of the government as it refuses to recognise the judgments of the High Court and Federal Court.

“That has propelled me more towards politics because when you have political power, you can change the policies and stance on relevant issues. It is very challenging but I think it is necessary and this is what I look forward to,” Baru adds.

According to him, bringing change through politics is the best option.

“Looking at the bigger picture, we must be involved in national politics and not be confined only to Sarawak. I would like to see that happening, if not in my generation at least in my children’s generation and I believe that Sarawak has a bigger role to play to forge this kind of integration,” he adds.
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Baru was admitted to the Sarawak Bar in 1986.

Baru (standing, 10th from left) and his UiTM School of Law classmates in 1984.

Baru with Enid Davidson, wife of Frank Davidson, one of the three pioneering missionaries who came to evangelise the Lun Bawangs in 1928.
The Bian family portrait. Baru (back row, far right) had seven siblings in all.
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