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Trends in Southeast Asia

MALAYSIA'S GENERAL ELECTIONS 2018:
UNDERSTANDING THE RURAL VOTE

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Trends in Southeast Asia



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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Malaysia's General Elections 2018: Understanding the Rural Vote

By Serina Rahman

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This study was carried out in Johor and Kedah through a combination of focus groups, formal and informal interviews and long-term ethnographic participant observation. Johor was selected for this study because it is the birthplace and long-time bastion of UMNO while Kedah was of interest because of the Mahathir family legacy in the state. The study shows that the rural vote is not homogeneous; views and perceptions that could lead to electoral action differs between regions, ages and genders.
- Daily survival and rising costs of living are the key common issues that were raised across all regions. The importance of Malay rights and the priority of Islam are also important to the rural voter. Another common problem mentioned is that of the middleman who prevents allocated funds or financial assistance from reaching the average rural resident.
- Malay cultural norms, traditional obligations of loyalty and patronage politics are major factors that affect the decisions of older rural voters.
- Younger voters might be open to the idea of a new government, but they need to overcome community and family pressure to break away from generational practices of voting for Barisan Nasional.
- Some rural voters feel that they gain no benefits from having either side of the political divide in power. While these voters generally do not see the point of voting, a last-minute decision to vote may go the way of the party that provides them with immediate gains.

Malaysia's General Elections 2018: Understanding the Rural Vote

By Serina Rahman¹

INTRODUCTION

In the last Malaysian general election, it was said that a Chinese tsunami swung the popular vote in favour of the opposition. This year, in the 14th General Elections (GE14), the group that will make the biggest difference are the rural Malay voters.² For the first time ever, there seems to be a possibility that the rural Malay voter in Peninsular Malaysia might move away from UMNO. While urban centres in West Malaysia are already largely in support of the opposition, it is a “rural Malay tsunami” that is needed to break the ruling party’s hold on government.

According to Politweet,³ voter categories can be divided according to the following criteria:

¹ Serina Rahman is Visiting Fellow under the Malaysia Studies Programme of the Regional Economic Studies at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. She is grateful for the assistance and input of Razali bin Arsad, Marmah bte Eaimen, Manisa bte Md Arif, Mohd Haikal bin Zamani, Shalan Jum’at, Ainis Azreen, Prof Mohd Azizudin bin Mohd Sani, Dr Ummu Atiyah bte Ahmad Zakuan, Wan Saiful Wan Jan and the many other rural folks who were so generous with their time and thoughts; without their contributions, this paper could not have been written. She would also like to thank Pearlyn Y. Pang for the invaluable maps that she created for this publication.

² *Star Online*, “The truth is out there”, 4 February 2018 <<https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/columnists/on-the-beat/2018/02/04/the-truth-is-out-there-malaysia-is-much-more-complex-than-meets-the-eye-as-we-are-not-just-about-big/>>.

³ <<http://politweet.wordpress.com/2013/05/21/the-rural-urban-divide-in-malysias-general-election/>>.

- Rural — villages (*kampungs*), small towns, farmland distributed within a parliamentary or state seat. Rural seats tend to be physically large but have a low population.
- Semi-urban — larger towns or numerous small towns; may include villages as well.
- Urban — cities where a majority of the seat area is covered by some form of urban development.

Tindak Malaysia⁴ has shown that most rural seats are over-represented, meaning that only a few votes (in the thousands), carry the power to elect a representative. On the other hand, an urban seat can have tens of thousands of votes counting towards the election of a single representative. This means that the weight of a rural vote is far heavier and more influential than that of an urban vote.

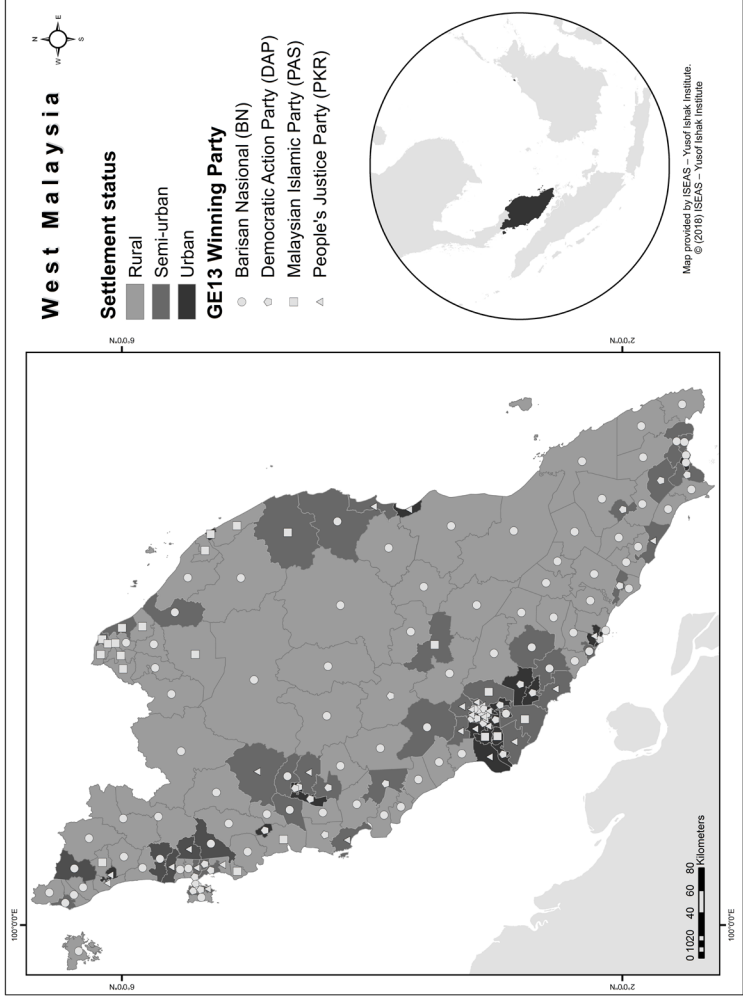
Figure 1 illustrates the spread of rural, urban and semi-urban votes and the winning party during the 13th General Elections. The map clearly demonstrates how many of the large rural seats were won by the ruling party.

The year 2018 could be the first year that Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM) competes in the general elections, if it is allowed to contest.⁵ It would be a historic entry. Helmed by Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's longest serving former Prime Minister and now ex-UMNO member, this avowedly Malay nationalist party could be the only opportunity for the Pakatan Harapan (PH) opposition coalition to wrest rural Malay votes from the current government. PPBM members comprise a number of disgruntled ex-UMNO politicians, many of whom left the

⁴ Tindak Malaysia website: <www.tindakmalaysia.org/persempadanan>.

⁵ This will occur if PPBM's issues with the Registrar of Societies (RoS) can be resolved. More background information on the matter can be found at *New Straits Times Online*, "PPBM can be deregistered if issues are not resolved — RoS", 11 November 2017 <<https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2017/11/302112/ppbm-can-be-de-registered-if-issues-not-resolved-ros>>. At the time of writing, the RoS has banned the party from all activities for a month, and this is in the expected run-up to the elections.

Figure 1: Map of Peninsular Malaysia, the spread of rural, semi-urban and urban seats, and the winning parties in each seat during the 13th General Elections.



fold in protest against current Prime Minister Najib Razak's alleged financial transgressions. Some believe that it is only this new evolution of ex-UMNO members and the leadership of Mahathir Mohamed that can convince the rural voter that their interests will not be forsaken. Recent developments may, however, result in all opposition parties campaigning under the People's Justice Party banner (PKR).⁶

Based on multiple sources that appeared over the last six months, this paper will provide a peek into the psyche of the rural voter. The first section will provide an explanation for the choice of Kedah and Johor as study sites, then outline the methodology used for focus group discussions (FGDs) there. The following section will provide an ethnographic explanation of rural communities to facilitate a better understanding of the thought processes, values, constraints and the overall reality on the ground that affects electoral behaviour. The details derived from the FGD research are then discussed, with emphasis on the issues that matter to rural communities. The last section will outline more recent developments since the FGDs were concluded.

The rural vote is not solely Malay; there are also Chinese, Indian and indigenous voters in rural areas, but this paper focuses solely on the Malays because of the influence of UMNO and the desired outcomes of PPBM. Analysts have noted that Indian and indigenous people will have more influence in GE14 given the marginal nature of many seats in the previous election, but those aspects are excluded from this paper. This study only looks at rural issues in Peninsular Malaysia as rural East Malaysian matters are completely different from those in the west; an analysis of East Malaysia would result in a vastly different discussion.

THE HISTORY OF VOTING IN JOHOR AND KEDAH

The focus of this study are the states of Johor and Kedah. Johor is of particular interest because it was the birthplace of UMNO and has

⁶ *Straits Times*, "Opposition parties say they will contest under PKR logo", 7 April 2018 <<http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/opposition-parties-say-they-will-contest-under-pkr-logo>>.

traditionally been an UMNO stronghold. Kedah on the other hand, is the home state of Mahathir Mohamad and his son, Mukhriz, a popular former Chief Minister when he too was with UMNO. Both states have sizeable rural Malay populations and in GE14 are showing signs of possible transitions to the opposition.

Johor

Johor has always been a bastion of UMNO. Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar once noted that “UMNO was born on palace grounds”,⁷ and that his great-grandfather funded its inception. Since then, UMNO has moved from strength to strength. While it was spawned from the anti-colonial movement, it eventually worked with the British colonial powers in negotiations for independence and the creation of the federal constitution. Ironically, in spite of their battle against the British for (among others) their attempt to curtail royal powers and implement equal rights for all races, UMNO followed in the footsteps of the British by continuing to rule and manage the federation by dividing people and power along racial lines.⁸

A number of prominent Johorean civil servants have been influential figures in UMNO, but UMNO’s success in Johor is said to stem from its ability to bring several race-based parties together in a coalition under the Barisan Nasional (BN) umbrella. This tactic helped UMNO (through BN) to manage disparate ethnic groups through their community representatives, and on top of that, convince voters to support candidates across ethnic lines. The overarching goal was to keep BN (and thus UMNO) in power.⁹

⁷ *Straits Times*, “Johor Sultan says much to learn from Singapore, talks about late son”, 27 December 2015 <<http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/johor-sultan-says-much-to-learn-from-singapore-talks-about-late-son>>.

⁸ The Malaysian Bar, “First all-race political action and People’s Constitution”, 1 August 2007 <http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/echoes_of_the_past/first_all_race_political_action_and_the_peoples_constitution.html>.

⁹ Francis E. Hutchinson, *GE-14 in Johor: The Fall of the Fortress?*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 3/2018 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018).

With this deft strategy, BN was resoundingly successful in Johor between 1958 and 2008. Only small blips in the record occurred when Kluang was lost in 1978 and Bakri was lost in 2008 to DAP. In state elections, BN won 85 per cent of total seats, conceding at the most six seats to the opposition. This record is even more significant given that Johor is ethnically diverse, with a population mix similar to Malaysia's overall ethnic breakdown.¹⁰ Given the much smaller number of representatives from the MCA, Gerakan and MIC components, Johorean voters have always risen above ethnic boundaries to vote according to the larger BN brand.

Kedah

Kedah's constituencies are all Malay-majority seats. Between 1955 and 2013, BN or the Alliance dominated Kedah's parliamentary seats, with UMNO taking the most seats within the coalition. The only exception was in 1999 when PAS won eight seats to BN's seven. PAS has been BN's most viable opposition in Kedah and often managed to take one or two seats away from the ruling party, with the exception of 1999. While the preference for BN returned in 2004, the following election saw BN once again losing its majority (winning only four seats) to both PAS (six seats) and PKR (five seats). In 2013 BN once again dominated (ten seats) with PKR hanging on to four seats and PAS taking one seat (one seat went to an Independent).

The significance of Kedah in GE14 is its status as the birthplace of Mahathir Mohamad. A popular son of the state, his family home in Alor Setar is now preserved and refurbished into a tourism attraction. Mahathir was the MP for Kubang Pasu from 1974 to 2004 and he is also credited with the development of Langkawi, the state's most popular

¹⁰ Johor's ethnic breakdown is 53.3 per cent Malay, 30.3 per cent Chinese and 6.5 per cent Indian. Malaysia's overall ethnic breakdown is 50.8 per cent Malay, 21.8 per cent Chinese and 6.6 per cent Indian (2015 figures). Source: Unjuran Populasi Penduduk 2015 <<https://web.archive.org/web/20160212125740/http://pmr.penerangan.gov.my/index.php/info-terkini/19463-unjuran-populasi-penduduk-2015.html>>.

tourist destination. His son Mukhriz Mahathir became MP for Jerlun in 2008 then stepped down to take up the state seat in Ayer Hitam before becoming Kedah Chief Minister in 2013. While he was undeniably popular as Chief Minister, he was replaced in 2016 through a no-confidence vote by Kedah UMNO leaders. The Mahathir family legacy is strong in Kedah and GE14 will be a test of loyalties between the family and the party that was once their vehicle to power.

The Rural Vote

Both Johor and Kedah are large states with more rural parliamentary seats than urban seats as shown in Figures 2 and 3.

In Malaysia, parliamentary seats refer to state representatives in the lower house of parliament (Dewan Rakyat), while state seats entitle representatives to membership in the state legislative assemblies. State assemblies do not need to be dissolved at the same time as the federal parliament, but in Peninsular Malaysia, this tends to be the case. Both parliamentary and state seats are elected from single-member constituencies in a first-past-the-post system.

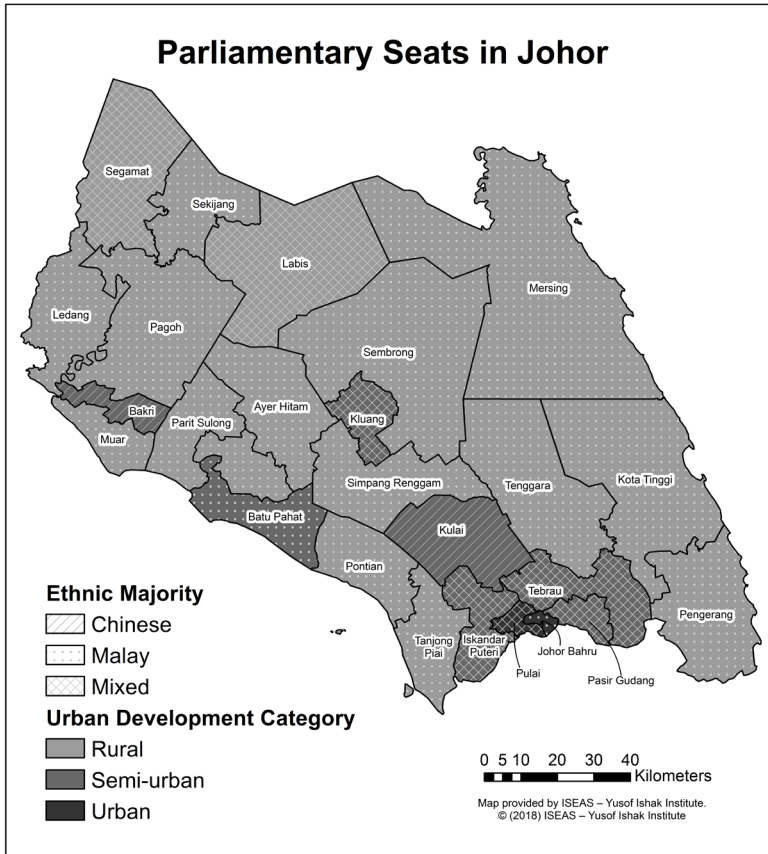
Historically, BN has won a disproportionate share of rural seats in Malaysia (including Sabah and Sarawak), with Johor and Kedah being no exception. In the last election, 108 of the 133 seats won by BN were rural seats, while the now-defunct opposition coalition of Pakatan Rakyat monopolized urban seats; 72 of the 89 seats that it won were urban and semi-urban. BN is said to represent the rural majority and could retain power with just the support of rural and semi-urban seats.¹¹

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a series of focus group sessions conducted in both states, in three locations. A total of seventy-two people were

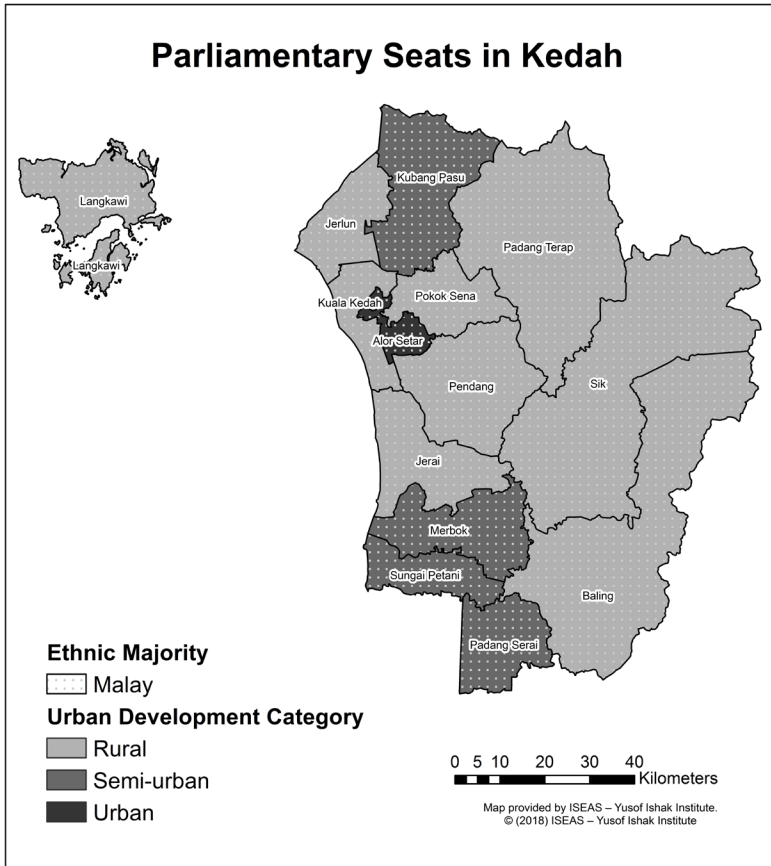
¹¹ Politweet.Org, “The rural-urban divide in Malaysia’s General Election”, <<https://politweet.wordpress.com/2013/05/21/the-rural-urban-divide-in-malaysias-general-election/>>.

Figure 2: Map of Johor parliamentary seats indicating ethnic mix and seat type (urban, semi-urban or rural)



involved in these extended focus group sessions, split into smaller groups by gender and age. The focus group discussions (FGDs) in Kedah were held in a rural community where rice fields are the dominant landscape and all participants were minimum-wage workers. In Johor, two sets of focus groups were held, one on the east coast in a FELDA community comprising FELDA farmers, associated workers and staff, and another in

Figure 3: Map of Kedah parliamentary seats indicating ethnic mix and seat type (urban, semi-urban or rural)



the rural outskirts of a semi-urban seat comprising mostly fishermen and their families.¹²

¹² The exact locations of these sessions are withheld to protect the identities of those involved in the survey.

All FGDs were conducted using the convenience sampling method. In both east and west Johor, selected local community members¹³ hosted sessions in their homes over light refreshments. Groups were divided by age and gender¹⁴ to ensure that participants were comfortable discussing the topics at hand. Stratification by age was to enable participants to speak freely without pressure or influence from their elders while gender separation was necessary to ensure that female respondents were not inhibited by the presence of men when responding. In Kedah FGD sessions were arranged with the staff of a local company. These participants originated from a number of rural areas near the FGD venues and were also separated by age and gender. FGD sessions in Kedah were held at the local branch offices of the host company over light refreshments.

The main thrust of the FGDs was to determine how the participants might vote and to better understand the issues that mattered to them. A standard set of questions were asked of each group as follows:¹⁵

1. What are the needs, wants, problems and issues of the community (that might matter at the ballot box)?
2. Who can provide assistance for the above?
3. What do you think about the current government, ruling party and leaders?

¹³ These selected participants were chosen because of their contacts within the community and ability to gather people for the FGDs. They then became hosts for the FGD sessions. Aside from the age and gender grouping, there were no specific guidelines given with respect to political leaning or affiliation. The hosts were informed that the purpose of the study was to determine voters' election issues and possible political leanings. No cash payments were made in return for the participation.

¹⁴ Age groupings were: below 35 years and above 35 years.

¹⁵ Respondents were allowed to speak freely so that a natural conversation ensued (at times between participants). I only prompted the participants or moved on to the next question when the topic at hand tapered out. At no point did I agree, disagree with or pass judgement on their responses. Occasionally scenarios were presented to the group (such as the suggestion of a female candidate as prime minister) to elicit their opinion on specific concerns.

4. What do you think of other leaders and parties (Mahathir Mohamad, Anwar Ibrahim, opposition parties)?
5. Do you know about the 1MDB, FELDA, other allegations and what do you think of them?
6. What are the most important criteria when it comes to voting/selecting a representative (race, religion, nominee, party, gender, age)?

FGD sessions usually stretched to about 2 hours each, with some respondents staying on after the formal discussion to share their personal views out of earshot of other participants.¹⁶

In addition to the focus group sessions, additional informal interviews were conducted with local informants¹⁷ who are very familiar with rural communities in both states. These conversations provided expert views based on an astute understanding of local conditions. Constant updates of the situation on the ground have been received from Kedah since the sessions and an additional visit was very recently made to Langkawi to get a feel of the ground there. My research over the past decade in Johor examining coastal communities for other studies, as well as my familiarity with rural conditions and people in both east and west Johor have added to the information presented here. Extensive engagement and immersion with local communities and almost daily participant observations of local behaviour, interests, issues and opinions in rural, coastal and island areas over the last ten years have provided additional insight into the possible leanings and evolution of the Johorean rural voter.

Beyond this initial study, more recent trends were monitored via online and print media, published reports of surveys by other institutions and organizations, as well as conference and seminar discussions. Much of the material gathered from Johor was further corroborated with the

¹⁶ The FGDs were recorded (with permission) but these off-the-cuff conversations were not. Copious notes were taken throughout.

¹⁷ These interviewees included but were not limited to: the street cleaners' supervisors, academics (Kedah), government agency staff, business people, academics, NGO staff (Johor) and the average man-on-the-street. Some of these informants requested that their names not be revealed.

results of a Johor Survey commissioned by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute and conducted by the Merdeka Institute in 2017.¹⁸

ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE RURAL VOTER

In order to understand the issues that matter to a rural voter, it is necessary to get a clearer picture of conditions and thought processes on the ground. The most important point to note is that the rural voter is not a single homogeneous block. Every region has its own idiosyncrasies and unique quirks but some characteristics, especially those related to culture and tradition can be applied across communities. This section highlights some features that make a difference to how a rural citizen might vote.¹⁹

Reverence for Royalty

Malay society being historically a feudal society, the rural Malay psyche is steeped in tradition. The Sultan's position at the top of the social hierarchy is a natural state of being; the rest of society accepts their places on the lower rungs. To the average rural Malay, respect for the Sultan only comes second to devotion to God.²⁰ This reverence stems

¹⁸ In this survey, 2011 Johor residents (all Malaysian citizens) were interviewed by phone, of which 55 per cent (1,104 respondents) were ethnic Malay. More details on the results of this survey can be found in several other ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute publications.

¹⁹ This information is gathered from extensive participant observation, engagement and immersion in rural communities over the past decade, in addition to recent FGD research and other studies carried out specifically for this paper.

²⁰ Malaysia's Rukun Negara (National Principles) which are recited daily in all schools, ingrains this hierarchy into its citizens from a very young age. The pledge reads as such: *Maka kami, rakyat Malaysia, berikrar akan menumpukan seluruh tenaga dan usaha kami untuk mencapai cita-cita tersebut berdasarkan atas prinsip-prinsip yang berikut: Kepercayaan Kepada Tuhan; Kesetiaan Kepada Raja Dan Negara; Keluhuran Perlembagaan; Kedaulatan Undang-Undang; Kesopanan Dan Kesusilaan.* (Translation: We, her people, pledge our united effort to attain these ends guided by these principles: Belief in God; Loyalty to King and Country; The Supremacy of the Constitution; The Rule of Law; Courtesy and Morality.) See also: A.B. Sulaiman, *Ketuanan Melayu: A story of the thinking norm of the Malay political elite* (Selangor: Vinlin Press. 2018).

from tales of sacrifice and protection given by royals past. Oral histories handed down through the generations remind the population of their ties to the lords of their lands; rural communities are constantly reminded of their debt to their feudal masters.²¹

This mindset is closely intertwined with the Malay principle of loyalty and indebtedness. It is part of *adat* (tradition) to always remember those who have helped you; to betray the hand that feeds you is a great social sin. Taken in tandem, these beliefs explain why the rural Malay is easily placated with gifts strewn by royalty or others of perceived higher standing. While the little that is given might be but a fraction of the giver's daily expenses, the community receives it with praise and gratitude because of its source and their own perceived position at the bottom of the hierarchy.

This loyalty to royalty is often used to incite voter anger and action at the polls. At a recent BN rally in the rural fringes of a semi-urban seat in Johor, an UMNO party representative used this to their advantage. His plea to the people was as follows:²²

Remember the time of Parameswara; from him came our various kings and our Johor royalty. If you vote for the opposition, they will close down the royal institutions. They will remove the power of our Sultan. This is like the pillars that hold up the roofs of our homes, our nation. If they remove this pillar it removes what it means for us to be Malay — our Sultans, our origins. Our roofs and our country will collapse.

In the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute Johor Survey in 2017, 90 per cent of Malay respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the performance of Johor royalty. Of rural voters, 88 per cent expressed

²¹ Anthony Milner, *The Evolution of the Malaysian Monarchy, and the Bonding of the Nation* (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2011), p. 18.

²² BN rally held in a village in a semi-urban seat in Johor on 21 March 2018 — exact name of location withheld to protect local informants. Speech translated verbatim from Bahasa Malaysia.

their satisfaction with royalty. When asked to rank the performance of Johor political leaders, 46 per cent placed the royal family in first place, followed by Khaled Nordin, Johor's Chief Minister, who was selected as top performer by 34 per cent of the respondents. Given the average rural Johor voter's affinity for the Sultan, political propaganda such as the above, on top of a history of disagreements between PPBM leader Mahathir Mohamad and Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar of Johor, do not bode well for the opposition in this southernmost state.

Respect for Political Leaders

When cultural norms of loyalty and hierarchy are extrapolated to the political context, a favoured politician can step into a position not too far below that of royalty. When they visit a rural community, they are treated like celebrities and the people remember (and are constantly reminded of) the good that the politician has done for them. They can thus do little wrong and any generous gifts given to the community are taken with great appreciation. Stories of excess by those in power have little traction.

The FGDs and my conversations with rural people corroborate this. When asked about the allegations of corruption, embezzlement and extravagance, those who are aware of the stories deny the relevance of the accusations to their lives. Their responses ranged from gentle admonishments for believing fake news and making judgements about people that they do not know personally to nonchalance as it is expected of those in the upper echelons of society to behave in this manner. Others noted that those who were complaining were people who had fallen out of favour with the party and thus had other intentions to avenge their dismissal. At BN rallies, the opposition is often referred to as "recycled politicians ... who all originated from BN".

At the end of the day, many told me, what the politicians did in "their world" made no difference to the respondents' daily struggle for survival. While some said that they had no time for the political drama, some of the older respondents pointed out that they did not have smart phones and thus no access to this news. Typical responses were as follows:

If they took the money or didn't take the money, I don't know. You cannot believe everything you read or hear. I don't care to know. I do my work and just focus on earning my salary and trying to have enough for my family to eat.²³

It doesn't make a difference to us. What they do up there is their problem. We just deal with our problems.²⁴

In FELDA communities in particular, the stress on the need to be loyal to those who raised them from the dumps is a common refrain. This view is especially prevalent amongst older FELDA settlers who shared stories of their struggle and difficult conditions in the early days. These first-generation settlers believe they owe their survival and progress to Abdul Razak Hussein, former Prime Minister of Malaysia and the father of current Prime Minister Najib Razak. It was Abdul Razak who started the FELDA scheme in 1953. While they dismissed Mahathir as the Prime Minister who paid the least attention to them, they firmly believe that the Razak family has their best interests at heart. To them, Najib Razak is the best option to manage Malaysia.

FELDA settlements have always been a BN vote bank.²⁵ Settlers are willing to vote for any component party member — even across racial lines — in order to maintain BN rule. This is because they are aware that UMNO controls the BN coalition and that their Malay rights are safe with the coalition. The DAP is frequently mentioned as a bogeyman. The FELDA elders sincerely believe that voting for the opposition will

²³ FGD session in FELDA estate, east Johor: male below 35 years (translated verbatim from Bahasa Malaysia).

²⁴ FGD session in rural parts of a semi-urban seat, west Johor: female below 35 years (translated verbatim from Bahasa Malaysia).

²⁵ Khor Yu Leng, "The FELDA quarrel and its national ramifications", ISEAS Perspective no. 51/2017, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 12 July 2017.

mean the end of Malay benefits at the hands of the DAP. Their greatest nightmare, as they described it, is for Malaysia to go the way of Singapore, where “Malays are marginalized and deprived of opportunities and their rights; suffering at the hands of the Chinese government”.²⁶

Toeing the Family Line

Hierarchical traditions in rural Malay society also applies to the thoughts and actions of family members. On several occasions after FGD sessions with participants below 35 years, eavesdropping elders took the time to remind the younger generation of the debts they owed to the ruling party.²⁷ They emphasized the need to remain loyal to those who had helped them out of poverty while others maintained that supporting UMNO was a family tradition. It is wholly unbecoming to break with tradition. Some of the more outspoken youths countered with opinions that ranged between the following:

Yes, it’s all good here in FELDA. We are very well taken care of. But if you go into the city it’s very difficult for the Malays there. The cost of living — food, rent, transportation, petrol. Okay maybe it’s just that the opposition government doesn’t know how to manage a state, but it is hard for everyone beyond FELDA.²⁸

²⁶ FGD session in FELDA estate, east Johor: male above 35 years. Similar sentiments were expressed in almost the same words by female respondents above 35 years in both east and west Johor (translated verbatim from Bahasa Malaysia).

²⁷ As the FGD sessions in Johor were held in hosts’ homes over light refreshments, they became a bit of an event with children or parents of participants in attendance. While discussions were held in a separate room, other family members would inevitably be listening at the doorway so that they too could contribute their views after the formal sessions were done. Informal sessions with these extended family members and friends then continued for a few hours after the actual FGDs. This did not occur in Kedah as those FGDs were held in branch offices.

²⁸ FGD session in FELDA estate, east Johor: female below 35 years (translated verbatim from Bahasa Malaysia).

We are second generation FELDA settlers. The benefits go to our parents but we cannot just make them our ATMs. They don't know how expensive it is now to raise children, to send them to school. And we are not always eligible for BR1M. How to survive?²⁹

What is the point of voting for the ruling party when they don't find out our problems? Who comes to help us? We tried going to so many people for help. Nothing. In the end that Chinese NGO in Johor Bahru helped us with our medical expenses. A Chinese NGO! If we have to just vote for UMNO because everyone does then maybe there's just no point in voting.³⁰

The pressure within the family and community to remain in support of UMNO and BN is strong. Rural Malay families are generational UMNO supporters and to go against family tradition and practice is tantamount to breaching the norms of filial piety. Many I spoke to admit to voting the way their families do because there is just no point in creating trouble within the family or breaking up friendships.

The Power of Women and Their Networks

Social peer pressure is a tool that Wanita UMNO has used with great effect in rural communities. Patriarchy is rife in rural areas and women have little public social standing. But women's networks are the backbone of every community and the avenue through which women are able to establish little spheres of power, control and influence. Rural Malay women have frequent gatherings either for prayer, social support in difficult times or community events such as weddings and ritual feasts. Wanita UMNO members are often prominent participants at these gatherings and are known to frequently provide financial or

²⁹ FGD session in FELDA estate, east Johor: female below 35 years (translated verbatim from Bahasa Malaysia).

³⁰ FGD session in west Johor: female under 35 years (translated verbatim from Bahasa Malaysia).

in-kind support for those in need.³¹ Many women in rural communities proudly wear their Wanita UMNO affiliation on their sleeves as they gain recognition for their service to the community.

Because a woman's access to a world beyond her home is often through these social events, it is important to the average rural Malay woman to abide by popular movements. When almost everyone else in the community is a Wanita UMNO supporter or member, it is difficult to go against the tide. The need to be part of the in-group means that it is extremely difficult to harbour different political views or profess opinions contrary to the dominant mantra. Rural Malay society is intensely communal. It is highly abnormal to have someone who thinks and acts alone, independently or differently from others. The very real possibility of being ex-communicated for being different prevents many women from breaking away or even publicly contemplating a different point of view. BN is fully aware of the power of their women's networks as can be seen in a recent promise by Wanita UMNO leader, Shahrizat Abdul Jalil that Wanita BN will prevent the opposition from gaining a foothold in Johor.³²

On the other hand, the authority of a woman in her home should also not be underestimated. In my discussions with rural women, many professed that they would censure their children if they decided to vote differently from themselves. Many also felt that they were able to wield influence over their husband's views. One woman I spoke to confidently proclaimed that how she voted determined the voting preference of her entire family:

In the past I was wholly in support of UMNO. My children, husband — we were all the same. But now things are difficult.

³¹ Wan Saiful Wan Jan, *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia in Johor: New Party, Big Responsibility*, Trends in Southeast Asia no. 2/2018 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018).

³² *Star Online*, “Shahrizat: Wanita BN will stop ex-UMNO leaders from gaining foothold in Johor”, 25 March 2018 <<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/03/25/shahrizat-wanita-barisan-will-stop-ex-umno-leaders-from-gaining-foothold-in-johor/>>.

I am going the other way and my husband and children are all voting with me. I take my whole family. Whoever I support, they support too.³³

While this FGD participant had made the decision to break away from BN, she did it with the support of her friends. There is strength in numbers when a decision is made to forge a new path. While she was clearly an influence on her family, her gumption in declaring her new allegiance was an anomaly. In all my other conversations with rural communities, confessions of empathy for opposition parties were revealed in whispers and only with the assurance that I would not reveal their identities or expose them to others in the community.

Many cited pressure from family, friends and neighbours for their fears. “What would people say if they knew I no longer support UMNO?” was the common comment. The need to protect the family name and reputation is an intrinsic part of Malay culture, hence the habitual difference between public pronouncements and private action. If there is a guarantee that their actions will not be revealed, public assertions and demonstrations of support for a political party may not necessarily translate into the same action at the ballot box. This might be helpful for the PH coalition.

Faith, Fear and Maintaining Favour

Religion is a central pillar of Malay lives,³⁴ but fear is a common tool used by rural Malays in matters of faith. The fear of deviating from the right path and forsaking a positive place in the afterlife is deeply embedded in the cultures of rural Malays. Some political parties have successfully tapped on this for votes. Rallies for the ruling party are bound to have a speaker with some sort of religious credentials espousing the values of UMNO and demonizing the DAP. It has been very successfully ingrained

³³ FGD session in Kedah: female over 35 years (translated verbatim from Bahasa Malaysia).

³⁴ A.B. Sulaiman, *Ketuanan Melayu*.

into rural thought processes that electing the opposition is equivalent to removing Islam as the national religion. By the same token, the nation's Prime Minister must be a Muslim to ensure the priority status of Islam.

Opposition Malays are deemed “liberal” and “*bebas*” (wild) for a range of reasons, including: the colour of their hair, their desire to eliminate JAKIM,³⁵ to support and propagate LGBT³⁶ lifestyles and “Gay Festivals”.³⁷ The fearmongering is effective. Comments such as “our *jihad* is at the ballot box” is commonly heard and rural Malays often mention that they need to have special prayers (*solat al-istikharah*) for the ruling party; for guidance and strength to do the right thing in the face of negative influences and emotions. BN rallies attribute the ability of the opposition to spin sweet tales to dalliances with the devil — and evidence that the DAP is *harbi* (a rather derogatory term for a non-Muslim enemy). As such, even a Malay Muslim party such as PPBM that collaborates with them will be “contaminated by this evil” and should not be supported. MCA representatives on the other hand, are said to be non-Muslims that the Prophet has declared acceptable to work with because they bring benefits to Muslims.³⁸ Homilies like these seem to be quite effective in garnering the rural faithful to vote for the more outwardly visible “religious” parties and their allies.

Access to Information

Access to information in rural areas is another critical factor that needs to be taken into consideration. While many rural Malays are frequent users of Facebook and WhatsApp, access to news is usually through government

³⁵ JAKIM is the federal Department of Islamic Development Malaysia.

³⁶ LGBT is the common abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual people.

³⁷ Part of a speech by an UMNO representative at a BN rally in the rural fringes of a semi-urban seat.

³⁸ Part of a speech by an UMNO representative at a BN rally in the rural fringes of a semi-urban seat.

print and television media channels.³⁹ While some information comes to them through Facebook posts and WhatsApp messages, the most effective channel of communication is word of mouth. For rural Malay men, this may transpire at the coffee shop or jetty, while for the women this takes place at social and religious gatherings or the daily morning chat on neighbours' doorsteps. Printed content written in Bahasa Malaysia is always deemed more credible than English sources but even then the language needs to be accessible to the average rural Malay and not too profound.

Perhaps this is why there is mute condemnation of crass language commonly used by some politicians. Village conversations can be far less refined than those in urban centres and to best get the message across, exchanges need to be in the local dialect. When that is not possible, the regular Bahasa Malaysia spoken amongst friends and family tends to be a little more unseemly than what is expected of usually refined Malay dialogue.⁴⁰ Malay norms intercede however, if public disrespect is shown to royalty or to elder statesmen. Thus while many now question the intentions and integrity of Mahathir because of his dalliances with the DAP, there is a great distaste at outright personal condemnation of the man. The Malay must above all else be seen to be *bersopan santun* (well-mannered and polite).⁴¹ Hence, even in no-holds-barred political exchanges, there are limits.⁴²

In urban areas, there are multiple sources of information as well as numerous opportunities to meet representatives of various parties. This is

³⁹ These include newspapers such as *Utusan Malaysia*, *Sinar Harian* and *Metro*. RTM is the main broadcaster on rural televisions.

⁴⁰ An example of a successful local politician in Kedah who knew how to apply the appropriate language in her engagement with the community can be found in *Star Online*, "Can Mahathir Swing it in Kedah?", 5 March 2017 <<https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/columnists/analysis/2017/03/05/can-mahathir-swing-it-in-kedah-there-will-be-an-intense-political-battle-for-the-malay-heartland-sta/>>.

⁴¹ A.B. Sulaiman, *Ketuanan Melayu*.

⁴² This recently came to the fore in *The Malaysian Insight*, "Keep belittling Mahathir and lose Kedah, warns UMNO vets", 22 March 2018 <<https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/44327/>>.

simply not possible in rural areas. In order to enter a rural village and set up a space for a meet-the-public session, the approval of the village head or members of the local committee (AJKKK) must be attained. I have been privy to conversations where villagers in support of the ruling party actively mobilize to prevent opposition party members from entering the area or speaking to people.

Even as preparations are made to welcome rallies by BN component parties, there are several caveats to consider. Among these are the guarantee of adequate gifts to the liaison party and those who attend the event. Lucky draw prizes and thank-you gifts are obligatory at these rallies; both at the request of local representatives and as customary favours from the campaigning party. In their defence, the local representatives will say that it is the only way to ensure that the rally will be well-attended, and to ensure that the villagers get something out of the deal. But it is clear that patronage politics has become a regular way of life for these communities. A newer, smaller, less well-financed opposition party would therefore have multiple stumbling blocks to overcome in order to gain access to the rural voter.

THE ISSUES THAT MATTER

The matrix in Figure 4 provides a summary of the issues that were raised in the focus group sessions and interviews. The following sections will delve deeper into the common elements and those that differ between states, age group or gender.

Common Threads

The focus group discussions reveal that the common issues of concern to the rural voters in Kedah and Johor are that of daily survival. In all sessions, participants mentioned the effects of GST, rising costs of living and the removal of petrol subsidies as matters that add to their daily burden. These are issues that they want the government to resolve. Most groups also mentioned that while they have jobs, their salaries remain stagnant even though costs of living are increasing. This is especially painful for those working in private companies, and they are well aware

Figure 4: Matrix of the main issues raised during focus group discussions and interviews

GST	cost of living	petrol prices	stagnant salaries
lack of job availability	property & land prices	access to assistance	cronyism
Malay rights	protection of Islam	grassroots presence	younger candidates

that civil servants are constantly receiving benefits and salary increases from the government.⁴³

Several female respondents below 35 years mentioned that finding jobs or part-time work (especially in FELDA estates) is hard, and there is little opportunity for them to work near home. While there were two (female) university graduates in the FGDs, they did not mention any problems with their National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPN) student loans, a common election topic of the opposition parties. However, they had to struggle to find their first job and were still unemployed.

The men always raised the problem of not being able to buy land or their own home. They complained about rising land prices (especially in Johor) and their inability to even buy under the “affordable home” scheme.⁴⁴ Many were living in rented houses or squatting on other

⁴³ In the Malaysian social hierarchy, civil servants are seen to be higher ranked than rural people.

⁴⁴ While the rural community might be deemed eligible for the affordable homes scheme, they were unable to find the cash to pay for the down payment and other costs required. Rural people, especially fishermen, are usually cash poor and have little savings and irregular incomes.

people's land; others shared land with siblings or relatives and had no means of moving out onto their own properties. Rising rental rates were also mentioned as an issue that needs to be resolved.

For the rural voter, these matters and their constant struggle to make ends meet are far more important than politicking, election campaigning and any mention of politicians' scandals or impropriety.

When asked about the usefulness of the 1Malaysia People's Aid programme (BR1M), almost all responded that BR1M gave them a single pay-out of up to RM1,000, but the government takes back far more through GST and rising prices. In Johor many respondents said that they had trouble getting BR1M payments; either because they had no means to go into the city to process the forms, or they were unable to provide all the documentation that was required, and that their village head or committee were not helpful in the process. Several said that they had been rejected and that many of their friends and family were also declared ineligible for BR1M. In contrast, participants in Kedah seemed to have had no problems accessing the payments.

Another common grouse mentioned across the FGD sessions was the problem of the middlemen. These refer to anyone in a position of power above the rural people; community committee members, village heads, UMNO branch heads, and fishing or farming association heads. The standard complaint is that assistance and compensation (for land acquisition due to development, habitat damage or natural disasters) are set aside by the government and its leaders. However, there is a layer of "cronies"⁴⁵ who hold the power to disburse these monies, and decide who is eligible to receive it. It was repeatedly mentioned that people in dire need are constantly passed over for a relative or crony.

Corruption at these lower levels of governance acutely affects rural communities. While some are aware that the Malaysian Anti-Corruption

⁴⁵ The local meaning to this term is anyone with connections and access to funds, compensation monies and projects or subcontracted jobs. These could be close family or friends of the person who controls the disbursement of monies or opportunities.

Commission (MACC) do arrest government officers for corruption, most felt that nothing comes out of the arrests and perpetrators get away with the crimes scot-free. A few noted that corruption charges have been made against lower ranked officers (as scapegoats) while bigger crimes at higher echelons of government are ignored. Some of the respondents felt that the government is doing well in terms of having allocated the funds for the people, but it is the middlemen who make things difficult for the citizenry. Female respondents also mentioned that they deplored the infighting, bickering and favouritism demonstrated by Wanita UMNO.

Other common threads that emerged as a result of the discussion were the importance of Malay rights and Islam as the national religion. For the rural people that I spoke to, the Prime Minister must be a Malay Muslim, but there is no gender preference. Indeed throughout the FGD sessions, the participants made it clear that their voting choice depended on the characteristics of the person standing for office, not on his or her party.⁴⁶ It mattered more that their representative was present in their lives during special occasions (festive seasons, weddings, deaths, ritual feasts etc.) than to appear with gifts once every 5 years. They insisted that they wanted someone who could do the work, fix the problems and produce results. Because many had come to them with unfulfilled promises, they would only support someone with a clearly visible track record of providing assistance or that they knew personally.

There was also a collective yearning for younger candidates to be put forward. While all participants felt that the presence of more seasoned politicians is necessary as guidance, everyone is keen to see younger politicians taking a stand. This was especially so amongst the younger participants in the FGDs.

⁴⁶ This is in contrast to older studies which showed that people voted according to party, not personality. A recent article on a survey conducted to determine how discerning voters are can be found in *Malay Mail Online*, “Malaysian voters more discerning now, polls suggest”, 18 December 2017 <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/malaysian-voters-more-discerning-now-poll-suggests>>.

It is interesting to note that Kedah's most viable opposition party throughout history was PAS, and that the 2017 Johor Survey indicated that the second most accepted political party in Johor is PAS, albeit with low percentage support.⁴⁷ Yet throughout the FGDs, mention of PAS received only lukewarm responses. In east Johor, the respondents felt that they were a good alternative only because of their Muslim credentials — but it was stressed that this was only if UMNO was not an option. In west Johor, PAS was clearly out of favour as those interviewed saw them as hypocrites who would condemn the government but be first in line to receive benefits. They saw through their claims of religious piety and cited many examples of dishonourable behaviour. In Kedah, mention of PAS was met with a shrug and simple dismissal. They no longer seemed to feature strongly on the political radar.

As mentioned earlier, the rural vote is not homogeneous. While there are common concerns and issues, there are also many differences between gender and age groups, as well as regions.

East Johor

The respondents in east Johor were overwhelmingly in support of the ruling government and resolutely believed that only Najib Razak and his team could help them with their problems. They did not see a need for a change in the ruling government and felt duty bound to respond to BN's generosity by remaining loyal to the coalition. FELDA communities in Johor do live well; most report regular salaries which are generous for their needs. Their estates are well kept and have more amenities than the average rural Malay village. While respondents felt the crunch of increased costs of living, the older generation blames it on Chinese businessmen and not the federal government.

⁴⁷ The 2017 Johor Survey by ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute revealed that 47 per cent of Malay respondents overall felt that PAS was an acceptable party and 48 per cent of Malay respondents overall were favourable towards PAS.

Many FELDA children have moved beyond their humble backgrounds to become highly qualified professionals living in urban centres away from the estates. Those who move back to the estates concede that they return only because they have to take care of ageing parents. They lamented that they had no choice but to give up higher paying jobs and that there are few job opportunities in the estates. Their support for the ruling party is not as unwavering as their parents'. During the FGDs, the younger participants often mentioned the difficulties they faced in meeting monthly expenses and how the elders were not aware of the hardship faced by their generation. Displeasure at the government because of this was expressed in hushed voices with furtive glances towards the older generation in the next room. It was clear that there was strong family pressure to remain in support of the ruling party.

When asked if they might vote the other way, these younger participants maintained that the ruling party was the only option because their Malay rights had to be protected. They felt that the opposition did not have a good track record and they preferred to stick to the proven success of the current leadership. Echoing the sentiments of their elders, they too said that voting for the opposition could result in their suffering the same fate as Malays in Singapore. They also did not want to cause trouble in the family. These respondents felt that any transgressions that the current leadership might be involved in was none of their business. However, when asked their views of the oft-publicized allocation of land to second-generation settlers, they emphasized that they would only believe it when they see it.

West Johor

This rural edge of a semi-urban parliamentary seat has always been in support of BN. However, in 2013, there was a surprise fall to the opposition. Many attributed this to the clout of the opposition candidate but my conversations with people in the area revealed that theirs was a protest vote against the last-minute decision to replace the popular locally born and raised MCA candidate with an UMNO veteran who was a former Johor Chief Minister. Local Malay support for the MCA candidate overcame traditional racial boundaries because they were

familiar with him and they had known him as a youth who had grown up fishing with the rest of the community. As a politician he was a constant and regular presence in their villages and they believed that he had their best interests at heart, regardless of his ethnicity.⁴⁸ The strength of this loyalty towards him, which carries on till today, is an indication of the importance of a politician's physical presence in their constituency, and how much the rural voter values grassroots efforts.

The FGDs in West Johor elicited the most differences between age and gender groups. The views of women in this area also differed according to age. The comments of the older women in this community were similar to those of the FELDA elders; only BN can serve them best, even though they were unable to identify local party representatives who could help them in times of need. They too blamed increased costs of living on Chinese businessmen who "abused the GST and raised prices indiscriminately". They did not believe the allegations of corruption against the ruling party. While they conceded that Mahathir Mohamad was once good for the nation, they felt that he had crossed to the dark side by colluding with the DAP, and that he is now a hypocrite who is not to be trusted because he now sits at the same table as his sworn enemies.

The younger women on the other hand, were not interested in politics at all. They claimed to be unaware and uninterested in political scandal. To them, their situation and daily struggle were the same no matter who was in power; no political representatives ever came to see them and Wanita UMNO did not include them on their list of beneficiaries. They were unable to get help from village representatives or committees, struggled to find jobs and could hardly make ends meet. Some said they will still vote as it is their duty as citizens, and that they will vote for BN as this is what their family does. But a few were more apathetic and questioned the need to vote when there was nothing in it for them.

⁴⁸ A common comment in response to this politician is that they will always remember his efforts for the community "*kami kenangkan jasa dia*". Again, this is part of the Malay cultural need for loyalty to those who have given them a helping hand.

The FGDs with the men in this community were rambunctious events where both young and old seemed to vent their frustrations. The men were well versed in all the political narratives and felt that both sides were equally corrupt and problematic. These participants felt that Malaysia should have Singapore's order and systems, and while they felt that Malay rights needed to be preserved, they did not see any problems with the situation in Singapore. Several said that they knew several Chinese Singaporeans who were kind and generous with them, that Malay Singaporeans were doing well, and that they had no issue with the Chinese fishermen from the village who shared the same jetty and struggled as they did at sea. These men maintained that the Prime Minister had to be a Malay Muslim so that Islam can be preserved as the primary religion of the nation, but they also noted that they already had Malay Muslim leaders in power and it was not doing them any good, if not making them worse off.

All the men felt that change was needed but they did not feel that either side could help them. They blamed the increased cost of living on the federal government. While they approved of state government efforts, they attributed this to the Sultan's firm hand. However, they did not see that they can benefit personally from any of the development. In fact, they have suffered as a result of habitat loss and lower fish catch. The men were particularly unhappy with the middlemen who they felt stood in the way of financial assistance or compensation monies that were due to them. They saw corruption at all levels of governance and felt that everyone was able to get away with it, at the expense of rural communities like themselves.

They wanted a younger field of politicians, and those who had the characteristics of the Johor Sultan or the Crown Prince. To them, the Johor royalty embodied the qualities needed in a leader — one who is not afraid to be firm and who makes unpopular decisions if it is in the best interests of their people, and one who does what they say instead of issuing empty promises. Given the dearth of choices and their lack of faith in both sides, they said that if the weather was bad or if it was good fishing season at sea, they would not waste the day voting. And if they do go to the ballot box, it will be in support of whoever can give them the most immediate benefits.

Kedah

The responses from the FGDs in Kedah were divided along age differences. The older participants spoke along the same lines as the FELDA elders in terms of not being able to trust DAP and the risk of becoming Singapore or Penang. However, they had more positive views of Mahathir Mohamed and his son and several acknowledged that the Penang government provides assistance to all. They also claimed that UMNO infighting and cronyism meant that they had to repair their homes after the floods without state aid. They also reminisced about happier days of visible progress under Mukhriz Mahathir and commented on a lack of community events or even lighting at state government buildings under the current leadership. The elders in Kedah seemed torn between their nostalgia for the days under Mahathir Mohamad and the need to be in support of UMNO.

The younger FGD participants were very different in their views. The men were wholly in support of PPBM and claimed that all of their friends and family were with them in moving over to “Parti Bunga”.⁴⁹ Interestingly, they said that the women they knew remained steadfast UMNO supporters, and they predicted that Wanita UMNO in Kedah will not have anyone to help them put up flags and do heavy work because the men had all crossed over to the opposition. However, the session with women below 35 years revealed that they too were in staunch support of PPBM, but they had not discussed it with their husbands or family members. They maintained that they had already decided who to vote for, they did not need to attend any rallies, and they were not going to discuss it with their spouses or families. They revealed that their parents find it hard to leave UMNO.

The common phrase heard in Kedah from all the FGD participants was “*kecewa*” or disappointment. While the older participants conceded that they were disappointed with the trajectory of the nation, they were hesitant to complain or admit that they might want to vote another way. The younger participants, however, were excited and impatient for their

⁴⁹ “Parti Bunga” is the local name for PPBM. It is a reference to the hibiscus insignia on the red flags of PPBM.

turn at the ballot box. While they all received BR1M, they felt that it was not much in view of the rising cost of living and GST. All the younger respondents were struggling to make ends meet with children to feed and put through school. They were also cognizant of the fact that their lives in rural Kedah were not as difficult as those of friends or family in more urban areas such as Alor Setar and Sungai Petani where costs of living were higher. They said they could not imagine how people in Kuala Lumpur or Johor Bahru can survive.

These younger participants were very well versed in the prevailing political narratives and aware of conditions beyond their state — especially the women. The men said that they were mobilizing for change and while both genders felt that they were unsure how the opposition might rule, they had faith in the Mahathir family and wanted to give them a chance. They did have misgivings about DAP but they had friends who told them that Penang was actually run far better than how it is portrayed in the media. These respondents wanted Mukhriz Mahathir as Prime Minister and felt that the only cure for the nation’s maladies is a younger generation of politicians who can rejuvenate the economy and put a halt to corruption.

Unlike Johor, there was no mention of the royal family during the focus group sessions and interviews in Kedah. When probed about their royalty and whether their views mattered, I received somewhat blank looks in return. A few whispered in embarrassment because they were unable to remember their new Sultan’s name.⁵⁰ In Kedah it seems, the rural community are not as attached to their king as they are in Johor.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS ON THE GROUND

The earlier sections of this paper have provided some insight into the behaviour and thoughts of a selection of the rural voter based on focus group research and participant observation of these communities over

⁵⁰ The FGDs in Kedah were held a few months after the death of Sultan Abdul Halim Mu’adzam Shah. While a new king (Sultan Sallehudin Badlishah, the late sultan’s younger brother) was proclaimed not long after, the royal installation ceremony has not yet taken place.

an extended period of time. The work does not purport to represent all rural people across Peninsular Malaysia as rural communities are not homogeneous. Every region and locality has their own issues, views and traditional priorities. The FGDs were concluded in November 2017. Since then I have returned to Langkawi and stayed in touch with contacts in Kedah to monitor the sense on the ground. I am permanently embedded amongst rural communities in West Johor and have been able to observe sentiments on a daily basis. This section will briefly discuss changes on the ground since the FGDs took place.

A visit to Langkawi in early March 2018 revealed that there were more PPBM flags on the roads than BN flags. While BN stations seemed to be rather worn, refurbished containers, PPBM action centres were freshly painted buildings or part of permanent buildings that seemed ready to mobilize for electoral change. Conversations with the Langkawi locals about their views elicited whispered indications of their steadfast loyalty to the Mahathir family. This was despite Najib Razak celebrating Chinese New Year on the island with promises of RM1.3 billion (about S\$440 million) in infrastructural improvements.⁵¹ Prior to that, BN's popular Minister of Youth and Sports, Khairy Jamaluddin had also stopped in Langkawi to remind the locals that Mahathir's previous contributions to the island was only possible with UMNO support.⁵²

Mainland Kedah has also received a lot of attention from the ruling government. 148 residents received Temporary Occupation Licenses (TOL) for their homes in Ayer Hitam from Kedah Chief Minister Ahmad Bashah Md Hanipah.⁵³ Najib Razak recently launched the

⁵¹ *New Straits Times*, "PM arrives in Langkawi for two-day work visit", 16 February 2018 <<https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2018/02/336135/pm-arrives-langkawi-two-day-work-visit>>.

⁵² *Sun Daily*, "Unlikely Mahathir can develop Langkawi without UMNO, BN: Khairy", 3 February 2018 <<http://www.thesundaily.my/news/2018/02/03/unlikely-mahathir-can-develop-langkawi-without-umno-bn-khairy>>.

⁵³ *New Straits Times*, "Do not be cheated by the opposition's empty promises, Kedah MB advises voters", 4 March 2018 <<https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2018/03/341317/do-not-be-cheated-oppositions-empty-promises-kedah-mb-advises-voters>>.

development of new homes for relocated fishermen in Yan, Jerlun and distributed allowances amounting to RM460,000 (about S\$155,000) to 1,605 fishermen in the wider region.⁵⁴ Following that, the Chief Minister announced the relaxation of local land ownership laws to allow resident Siamese communities to purchase homes originally allocated for Malay-only purchases.⁵⁵ Jerlun and Ayer Hitam were both former seats of Mukhriz Mahathir and the Siamese community were known to be in support of PH.⁵⁶

In some Johor FELDA estates, second-generation settlers have been given offer letters for newly built affordable homes, part of the 20,000 units promised by Najib Razak.⁵⁷ A FELDA 2.0 package incorporating new strategies for sustainable environment and economy was launched in February 2018, attracting 10,338 settlers back to the scheme.⁵⁸ Other recently announced bonuses for FELDA settlers include RM631,821 in allowances for 157 settlers for an intensive planting scheme, RM2.85 million in incentives for 567 settlers, RM1.81 million for 362 FELDA returnees and a promise of RM10 million for necessary infrastructure such as street lighting, road widening and mosques.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ *Star Online*, “Najib: Barisan has proven its commitment to fishermen’s interests”, 26 March 2018 <<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/03/26/najib-barisan-has-proven-its-commitment-to-fishermens-interests/>>.

⁵⁵ *Malaysian Insight*, “Kedah relaxes conditions to allow Siamese to own homes”, 26 March 2018 <<https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/45203/>>.

⁵⁶ *Malaysian Insight*, “Dr Mahathir still holds sway over Siamese in Kedah”, 20 February 2018 <<https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/38806/>>.

⁵⁷ *Malay Mail Online*, “Second generation FELDA settlers receive housing offer letters”, 26 November 2018 <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/second-generation-felda-settlers-receive-housing-offer-letters>>.

⁵⁸ *New Straits Times*, “Najib launches FELDA 2.0 initiative, settlers’ number stand at 105,294”, 27 March 2018 <<https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2018/02/332003/najib-launches-felda-20-initiative-settlers-number-stand-105294>>.

⁵⁹ These bonuses in total come to RM15.29 million (about S\$5.15 million). *New Straits Times*, “PM: FELDA settlers, smallholders would suffer if opposition wins GE14, cancels contracts with China”, 25 March 2018 <<https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2018/03/348980/pm-felda-settlers-smallholders-would-suffer-if-opposition-wins-ge14>>.

In west Johor, 1,814 fishermen were awarded RM2,000 each by the Persatuan Nelayan Kawasan Johor Selatan (South Johor Fishermen's Association), a total of RM3.6 million (about S\$1.21 million).⁶⁰ Selected fishermen's jetties (*pengkalan*) in west Johor have also received RM20,000 each for jetty improvements and repairs, and there are rumours of an additional RM100,000 per jetty to be distributed soon.⁶¹ New fishing licences have also been promised, with all the Orang Asli of Sg Temuan having already received theirs.⁶² This is in spite of a long-standing freeze on the issuance of new fishing licences for the west coast of Malaysia since the 1980s because of over-exploitation of coastal marine resources.⁶³

Johor's Chief Minister launched the Johor Structure Plan 2030 and invited input and suggestions from Johoreans, noting that Johor will improve as a team; taking note of its citizens' feedback and ideas.⁶⁴ BN rallies in the state praise the efforts of Khaled Nordin, honour the support of the Sultan for Johor's development and never mention Najib Razak by name. The Chief Minister's efforts for Johoreans are repeatedly lauded, especially his success in ensuring that there are no more squatters in Gelang Patah as every resident now has a legal home. Lucky draw prizes of home appliances and cash are continually distributed at these rallies.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ *Utusan Malaysia*, "RM3.6j saguhati nelayan", 26 March 2018 <<http://www.utusan.com.my/berita/wilayah/johor/rm3-6j-sagu-hati-nelayan-1.633171>>.

⁶¹ Personal communication, fishermen of west Johor: 27 March 2018 — names withheld by request.

⁶² Personal communication, fishermen of west Johor: 8 March 2018 — names withheld by request.

⁶³ Department of Fisheries, "Malaysia's National Plan of Action to prevent, deter and eliminate illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (Malaysia's NPOA-IUU)", 2013 <https://www.dof.gov.my/dof2/resources/user_1/UploadFile/Penerbitan/Senarai%20Penerbitan/Malaysia_NPOA_IUU.pdf>.

⁶⁴ *Star Online*, "MB: We will develop Johor as a team", 28 February 2018 <<https://www.thestar.com.my/metro/metro-news/2018/02/28/mb-we-will-develop-johor-as-a-team-he-says-ideas-for-state-structure-plan-2030-draft-welcome/>>.

⁶⁵ Personal observation, BN rally in west Johor parliamentary seat, 21 March 2018.

Johor's Sultan⁶⁶ and Crown Prince⁶⁷ have often explicitly maintained that the royal family is above politics and have no preference for any political party. The Sultan recently reminded state civil servants to stay out of politics and work for the good of Johor's citizens.⁶⁸ However, in their loyalty to their Sultan, the undecided Johor voter may be on the lookout for any hint of a preference from the royal family — even though they have no intention of choosing sides. Past rumours of issues with Najib Razak⁶⁹ may be raised in comparison to well-known long-term disagreements between the Sultan and Mahathir Mohamad.⁷⁰

More recently, the Sultan emphasized that there is no place for anyone who incites racial or religious intolerance and hatred in his state.⁷¹ This should serve as fair warning for any politician who wants to stay in the Sultan's good books so as to maintain a positive image in the eyes of the rural Johorean voter. The Crown Prince, however, just recently released a statement reminding the people to not be “fooled by a forked tongue individual... who is more worried about what will happen to his children

⁶⁶ *Star Online*, “Johor Ruler: I'm above politics”, 27 December 2015 <<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2015/12/27/johor-ruler-im-above-politics-the-interest-of-the-rakyat-always-comes-first/>>.

⁶⁷ *Malay Mail Online*, “Johor Prince: I support leaders with integrity not political parties”, 22 August 2015 <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/johor-prince-i-support-leaders-with-integrity-not-political-parties>>.

⁶⁸ *Star Online*, “Don't get involved in politics, Johor Sultan tells mayors, council presidents”, 26 February 2018 <<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/02/26/dont-get-involved-in-politics-johor-sultan-tells-mayors-council-presidents/>>.

⁶⁹ *Malay Mail Online*, “Give Najib a chance says Johor Sultan”, 27 December 2015 <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/give-najib-a-chance-says-johor-sultan>>.

⁷⁰ *Star Online*, “Johor Ruler slams Dr M over Chinese investment comments”, 16 January 2017 <<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2017/01/16/political-spin-angers-sultan-johor-ruler-slams-dr-m-over-chinese-investment-comments/>>.

⁷¹ Official Facebook page of Sultan Ibrahim <<https://www.facebook.com/officialsultanibrahim/posts/497888487044516>>.

in the future”.⁷² The media used the statement to declare that Johor royalty is not in support of the opposition.⁷³ Notwithstanding TMJ’s follow-up post clarifying that he has no political preference but has only Johor’s best interests at heart, the earlier comments will have an influence on the rural voter given his popularity in rural areas.

AT THE POLLS — ANYONE’S CALL ...

Word on the ground seems to signal more empathy and headway for the opposition, but the ruling party seems to be meeting every issue and problem raised head on and generous incentives have been widely distributed. BN’s means and machinery are undoubtedly outstanding, and far surpasses the opposition’s ability and resources to reach the rural voter. Add to that the constant sowing of doubt through the screening of old videos of opposition coalition members denouncing the integrity of its current partners and the use of fear tactics, among other tools; negative notions are burnt deep into rural voters’ minds.

⁷² The Crown Prince released this statement on the Johor Southern Tigers (JDT football team) Facebook page <<https://www.facebook.com/johorsoutherntigers.com.my/posts/1018145245015441>>; a lengthy post providing his personal view on the current political situation. Comments in response to this post disagreed with the Crown Prince’s views and most indicated their displeasure at the current government, even as they were in full support of the prince. This initial post was followed by another comment clarifying that he is not in support of any political party, but has only Johor’s interests at heart. The response to this follow-up post is more positive and clearly in support of the Crown Prince. The most common theme among the responses was that the people did not disagree with the Crown Prince, but they were very unhappy with the current federal government leadership <<https://www.facebook.com/johorsoutherntigers.com.my/posts/1018776294952336>>.

⁷³ *New Straits Times*, “TMJ: Time to restore the system damaged by 93-year old individual”, 8 April 2018 <<https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2018/04/354757/tmj-time-restore-system-damaged-93-year-old-individual>>.

This battle boils down to a matter of loyalty and tradition versus practicality and daily survival. While the idealism and energy of the youths seem to be in full support of the opposition, the weight of the apathy of those who are tired of politics may add to the rock solid loyalty of older generations and keep the ruling party in power. If Kedahans are able to see past recent bounties and if whispers of support translate into action at the ballot box, then Kedah may fall to PPBM. Armada, PPBM's youth wing, and the injection of new young intellectuals into the party may win over some urban seats in Johor. But Wanita UMNO, patronage politics and the well-oiled UMNO grassroots machinery cannot be underestimated. While recent surveys have shown that a number of seats in Johor are at risk,⁷⁴ it will be a huge achievement and a total cultural shift if Johor falls completely to the opposition. The chances of this happening seem very slim. We will only know for sure when the ballots are counted.

⁷⁴ Channel News Asia, "Johor a swing state in Malaysian election as hot-button issues come to the fore", 18 March 2018 <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/johor-a-swing-state-in-malaysia-general-election-10046304>>.

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