

PERSPECTIVE

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A Deep Dive into Malaysia's People's Justice Party (PKR)

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Facebook Page of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Malaysia. Accessed 18 March 2024.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Born from a protest movement against Anwar Ibrahim's unceremonious sacking by Mahathir Mohamad in 1998, the People's Justice Party (PKR) was officially established from a merger between two parties. Founding members came from different segments of society, tied by a common bond to its twice-jailed leader, Anwar.
- PKR has emerged as a definite force in mainstream Malaysian politics, winning an average of 35 seats (16% of total seats) and 2 million votes (18% of total vote share) over the past 15 years. The party has clearly grown stronger from its wobbly start in the 1999 and 2004 general elections.
- PKR is the second largest party in Malaysia, behind only UMNO, with 1.16 million members. Its membership growth is attributable to a low barrier to entry, party election incentives, and anticipated federal power patronage.
- Selangor is PKR's strongest base, with the highest total membership (30 per cent of total) and highest cumulative parliamentary seats won. This is followed by the East Malaysian states, though with low electoral returns, and Perak, where it has established a strong grassroots presence and won a sizable share of parliamentary seats.
- The centre of power lies in the hands of the president and the central leadership council, although the national congress is the highest authority. The state leadership is less powerful compared to the divisions in nomination and grassroots matters, partly due to the members' loyalty to the division leaders elected through direct elections.
- PKR holds the largest party elections in Malaysia via a one-person-one-vote (OPOV) direct election system. The logistical hassle creates long and chaotic party elections that typically ends in highly factionalised contests. The party has introduced online voting and a hybrid voting system as a corrective measure in recent years.
- Most PKR MPs win mixed and Malay-majority seats in urban and semi-urban enclaves. This reflects PKR's commitment to multiracialism and the party's limited ability to win Malay votes. PKR has benefited from the split in Malay votes among several parties, and this puts its electoral successes at risk if Malay votes converge to a dominant Malay party again in future.

INTRODUCTION

The earliest members of the People's Justice Party (PKR) disagree on when the foundational political movement, Reformasi, started. Some say it was 2 September 1998 when the then deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, was unceremoniously sacked by then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad.¹ Some say it was 20 September 1998 when the largest protest was staged at Masjid Negara.² Some say it was 17 May 2004 when the Registrar of Societies approved the merger between Parti Keadilan Nasional and Parti Rakyat Malaysia.³ In all versions, members agree that the party was tied by a common bond to its larger-than-life figurehead, who had gone to jail twice on controversial charges: Anwar Ibrahim.

The party consists of an 'unusual collection of leaders'⁴ from UMNO, PRM, student bodies, street activists, Islamic movements, and NGOs.

Despite being one of the youngest mainstream parties in the country (see Appendix 1), PKR has managed to reverse its electoral fortunes in the first decade to emerge as a key competitor in Malaysian politics.

Notwithstanding the party's storied past and current prominence in Malaysia's political landscape, research on PKR remains scant compared to that done on UMNO, PAS, and DAP. This limits public understanding of the party and how it works. This Perspective will first look at how PKR operates, particularly its entry criteria, membership, organisation structure, and finance. The second part examines the key differentiators of PKR, which are its unique direct election system and diverse membership. The paper concludes with reflections on the findings.

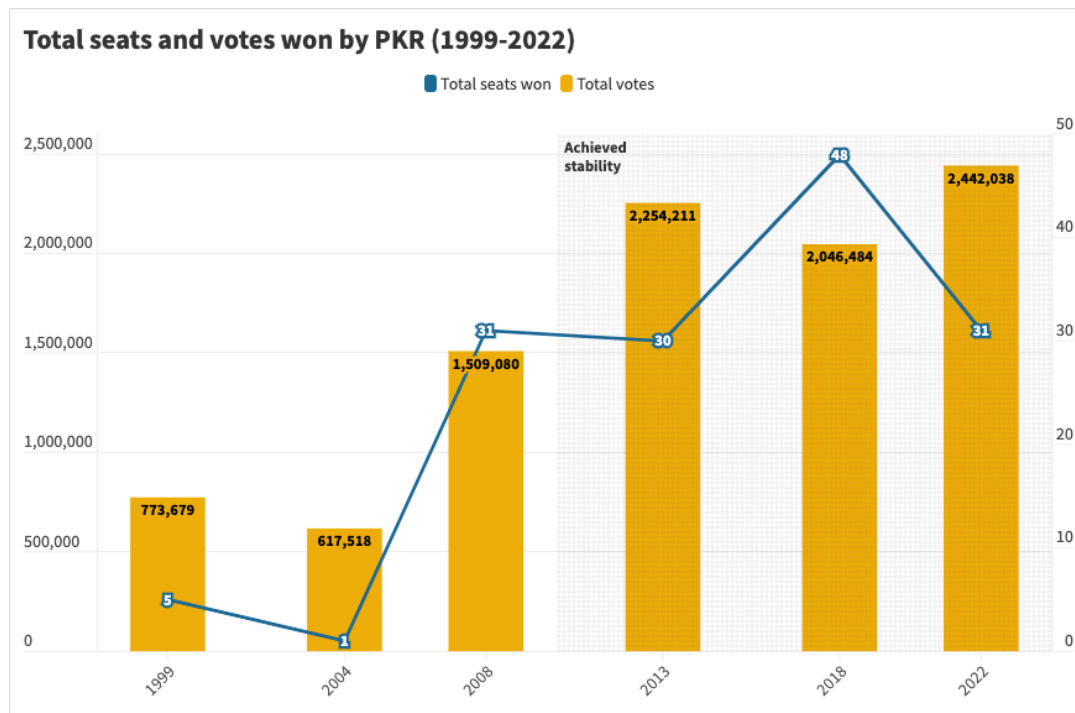
PKR's political journey: A brief glimpse

Table 1: Seats won and vote share of PKR since its first election in 1999

Election Cycle	Year	Total Parliamentary Seats	Seats Contested by PKR	Seats Won by PKR (per cent of total seats)	Win Rate	Total Votes (vote share)
GE10	1999	193	78	5 (2.6 per cent)	6.41 per cent	773,679 (11.7 per cent)
GE11	2004	219	80	1 (0.5 per cent)	1.25 per cent	617,518 (8.9 per cent)
GE12	2008	222	84	31 (14.0 per cent)	36.90 per cent	1,509,080 (18.6 per cent)
GE13	2013	222	99	30 (13.5 per cent)	30.30 per cent	2,254,211 (20.4 per cent)
GE14	2018	222	71	48 (21.6 per cent)	67.61 per cent	2,046,484 (17.1 per cent)
GE15	2022	222	100	31 (14.0 per cent)	31.00 per cent	2,442,038 (15.7 per cent)

NB: Win rate as seats won divided by seats contested; only considers parliamentary seats.

Chart 1: Total parliamentary seats won and total votes received by PKR (1999 to 2022)



Even though Reformasi created one of the largest ever protest movements in the country, it was surprisingly unable to convert the anti-government support into seats, winning only 5 seats in parliament in 1999 (2.6 per cent), and plummeting to its lowest point with only 1 seat in 2004 (Table 1 and Chart 1).⁵ This was due to a limited swing from the non-Malay voters who preferred status quo stability, and the anti-corruption appeal of BN’s Abdullah Badawi.

Since 2008, however, the party has gained stable prominence by achieving an average 35 seats (16 per cent of total seats) and 2 million votes (18 per cent of total vote share). In 2018, PKR even became the largest party in parliament, carried through its victories in marginal seats in West Malaysia; it made further history by being the first multiracial party to do so. The succeeding two years were chaotic for the party, however, when it experienced the largest high-profile defection, led by the former deputy president Azmin Ali. This stemmed apparently from years of intra-party instability. After a large-scale purge in 2022, party president Anwar Ibrahim finally achieved his aspiration of becoming prime minister, Malaysia’s tenth.

Additionally, the party governed the states of Selangor and Negeri Sembilan, since 2008 and 2018 respectively, with a substantial majority.

MEMBERSHIP, STRUCTURE AND FINANCE

Entry Criteria

To be a PKR member, the applicant has to register at the party headquarters, located in Kelana Jaya, Selangor, either physically or online, and the selected division must ensure that this registration is made with the party secretary-general as the main person in charge.⁶

Table 2: Comparison of entry criteria between select mainstream parties

Entry criteria	PKR	UMNO	PAS	DAP
Types of memberships	Ordinary and lifetime members ⁷	Ordinary, allied (<i>bergabung</i>), associate (<i>bersekutu</i>), and lifetime members	Ordinary, associate, and lifetime members	Ordinary and lifetime members
Minimum age	18 years old ⁸	16 years old ⁹	13-15 years old ¹⁰	17 years old
Fees (ordinary members, yearly)	RM2.00 ¹¹	RM2.00	RM10.00 ¹²	RM10.00 ¹³
Fees (lifetime members, one-off)	RM300.00 ¹⁴	RM100.00	RM102.00	RM200.00

As seen in Table 2, the entry criteria of PKR are not substantially different from those of other mainstream parties. Unlike UMNO and PAS, PKR does not have membership types outside the standard ordinary members (RM2.00 yearly fee) and lifetime members (RM300.00 one-off

fee). Surprisingly, PAS has the highest yearly fees among the mainstream political parties because it also exacts a mandatory purchase of a membership card and a registration fee which other parties do not do.

Importantly, the estimated compliance rate for payment of yearly fees seems low for PKR, either due to inefficient collection or members' refusal.¹⁵ Though PKR's 18-year-old minimum age seemed progressive at the inception, the Undi-18 wave compelled parties such as UMNO to loosen their minimum age to 16; thus, PKR's current minimum age is the most restrictive.

Interestingly, Article 4 of PKR's constitution attached the measurements and colours for the flag and symbol of the party. The 'eye' on the flag is the 'light that sees sacrifice for justice', and the red represents courage and commitment to seek the truth.

PKR's constitution is also differentiated for its details on policy commitments. Compared to the Malay parties, PAS and UMNO, which broadly highlight religion, Malay language, and national unity,¹⁶ PKR's purpose reads like a manifesto.

Table 3: Select articles of PKR party constitution relating to policy positions

Constitutional articles	Description
5.8	Distribution of powers with East Malaysia, in accordance with Malaysia Agreement 1963
5.10	Special position of Malay and East Malaysian bumiputeras who are poor and abandoned, and fair protection for non-Malays and non-bumiputeras who are poor and abandoned
5.11	Fair and dynamic economy, growth and fair distribution, free from oppression and wastage, overcome poverty and concentration of wealth
5.12	High-quality infrastructure (education, health, housing, transport) with affordable rates
5.13	Workers' rights protected
5.14	Women's position empowered as the backbone of society, respect for women, committed to achieving 30 per cent participation in leadership and decision-making ¹⁷
5.15	Meaningful expansion of rights for youths
5.16	Orang Asli (indigenous community)'s quality of life and respect for tradition, with development plans that protect their land rights
5.17	Environmental protection
5.18	New international system based on fairness and democracy, foreign policy that is free and ethical, facing globalisation by creating a knowledgeable society that can avoid national threats.

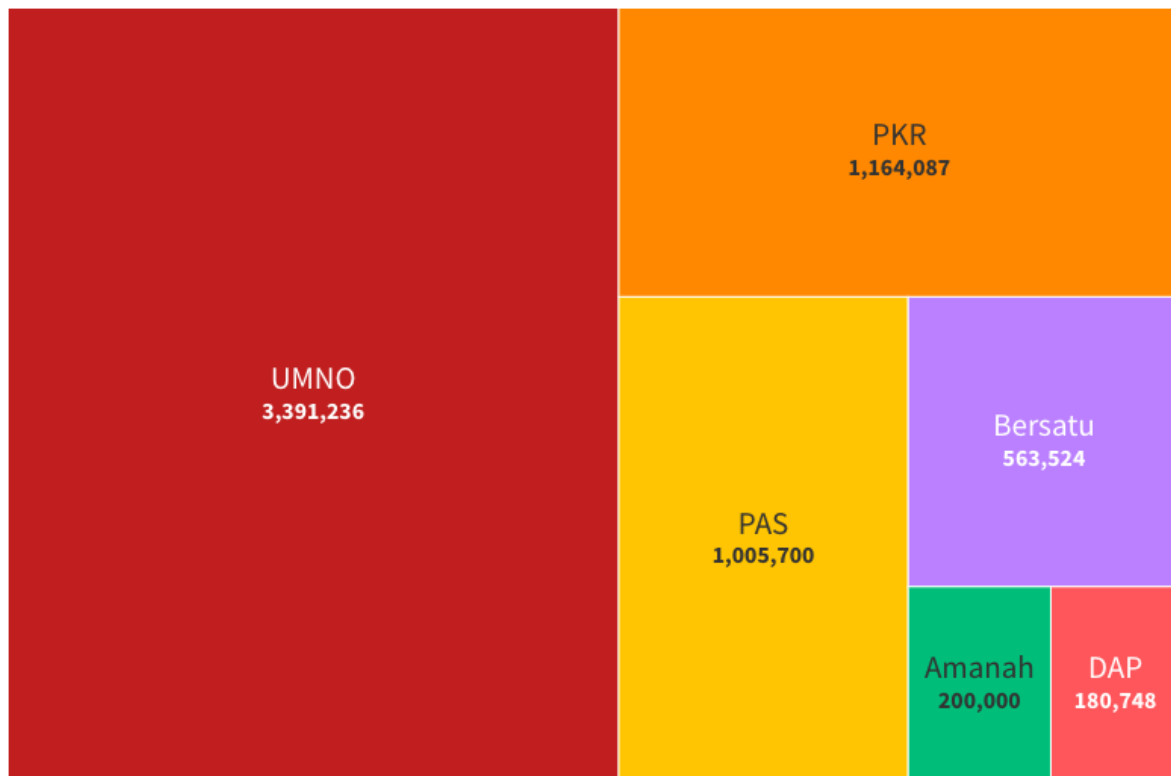
As observed in Table 3, PKR's constitution includes a wide range of policy areas to represent its values, including the rights and protection of the indigenous community, workers, women, and East Malaysia. The only other party with a policy-oriented purpose in its constitution is

DAP. However, even then, PKR’s constitution is more specific, even committing to 30 per cent female participation in leadership and decision-making, and recognising the Malaysia Agreement 1963.

Membership

As of 2022, PKR has approximately 1.16 million members, making it the second largest political party in Malaysia, only behind UMNO which has approximately 3.39 million (Chart 2). Having a membership number close to that of PAS, and their ranking would be interchanging, PKR will likely remain among the 3 largest parties for the foreseeable future.

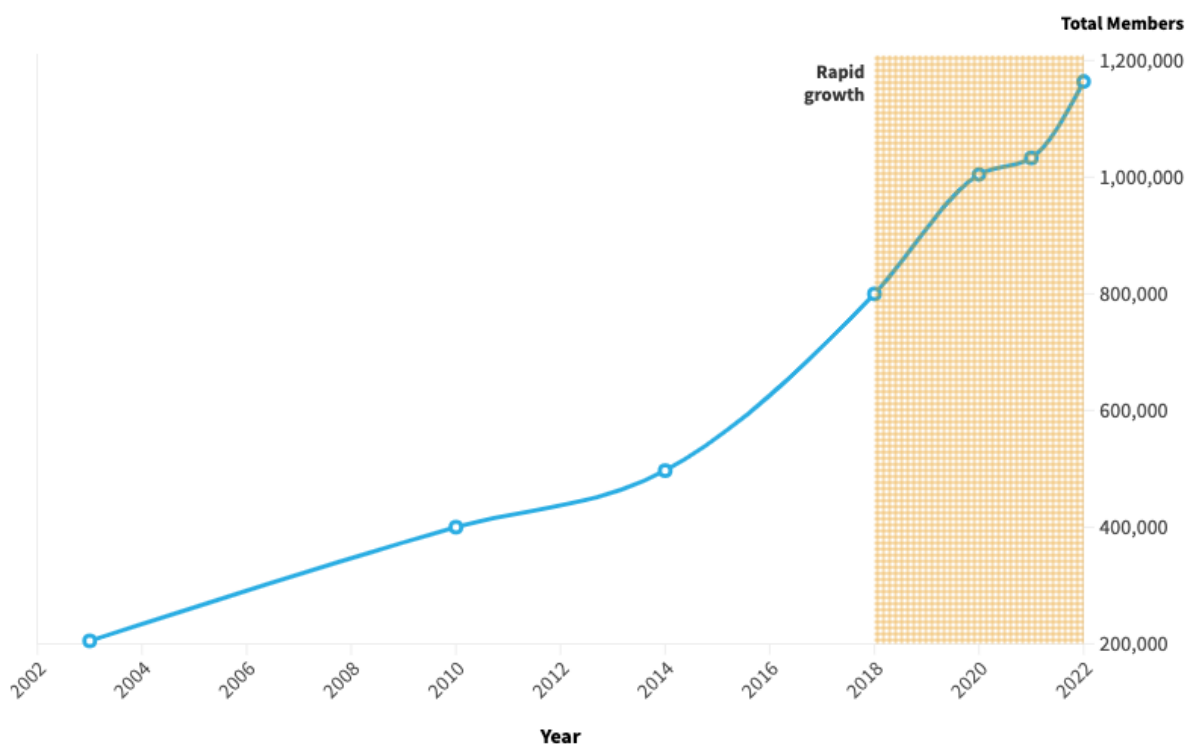
Chart 2: Total membership of each mainstream political party



NB: Membership numbers based on latest available, including UMNO (2022)¹⁸, PKR (2022),¹⁹ PAS (2022),²⁰ Bersatu (2021),²¹ Amanah (2019),²² and DAP (2022).²³

Chart 3: Total membership of PKR from 2003 to 2022 (select years only depending on available data)

PKR Total Membership (2003-2022)



Select available data since 2003 (Chart 3) show that before 2018, PKR received steady new members, averaging 26,000 yearly applications. In its early years, PKR’s new members were driven by youthful idealism; the party represented a strong anti-regime sentiment. From 2010 onwards, it was the low barrier to entry that played an important role; after all, the multiracial party accepts members of all backgrounds. The direct election system also meant that, compared to other parties, members could vote and run for party positions. Ambitious candidates would then recruit more new members before every election to strengthen their own positions.

Membership grew rapidly to ~89,000 per year from 2018 onwards,²⁴ the transformative year when PKR was part of the Pakatan Harapan government. Membership rose again in 2022 when Anwar became prime minister and it is predicted to rise again, with PKR now being the leading party in government. There may be higher expectation of patronage among new members after PKR won big in 2018 and 2022.²⁵ PKR has not adopted the model of past parties of relying on access to federal government resources for grassroots programmes.²⁶

Understandably, the rate of growth was lower between 2020 to 2021 in the wake of the large-scale defection event called The Sheraton Move, led by former PKR deputy president, Azmin Ali. Though there were reports of pockets of hundreds of members leaving the party with Azmin, the figure is likely much lower than was headlined. For instance, in Johor, the figure

of members sacked was estimated at less than 200,²⁷ and Kelantan PKR stated that only 300-500 left instead of the reported 10,000.²⁸

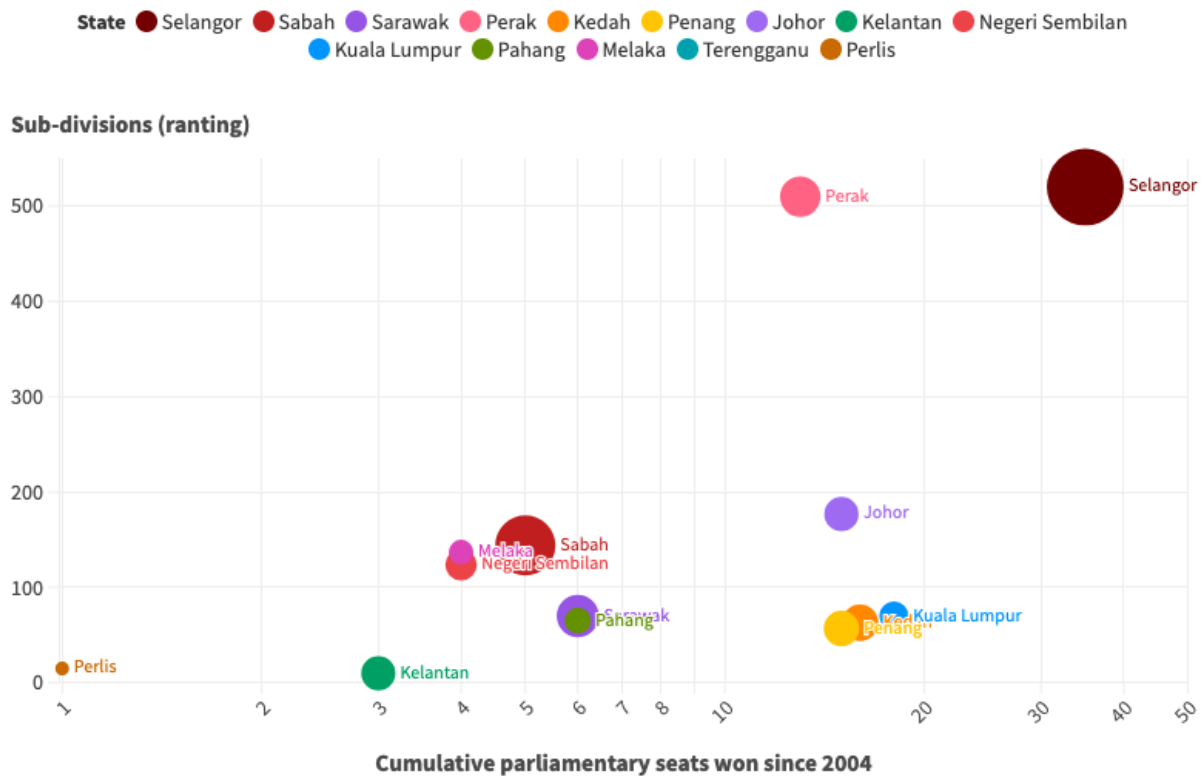
Party leaders argue that the membership growth and low defection resulted from a ‘brotherhood’ and ‘idealistic’ bond in PKR,²⁹ and the pressure to win in the party’s direct election system.³⁰

Table 4: Total membership, sub-divisions, and cumulative parliamentary seat won (since 2004) in PKR by states

No.	State	Total members (2021)	Total members (2022)	Sub-divisions (<i>ranting</i>)	Cumulative parliamentary seats won since 2004
1	Selangor	282,179	346,991	520	35
2	Sabah	173,191	184,251	144	5
3	Sarawak	84,760	87,334	70	6
4	Perak	78,194	85,239	510	13
5	Kedah	64,321	69,131	63	16
6	Penang	60,360	67,071	57	15
7	Johor	55,988	65,962	177	15
8	Kelantan	55,977	59,744	10	3
9	Negeri Sembilan	47,791	54,327	124	4
10	Kuala Lumpur	40,511	46,026	70	18
11	Pahang	32,810	36,123	65	6
12	Melaka	29,046	31,350	137	4
13	Terengganu	18,609	20,464	56	0
14	Perlis	9,176	10,074	15	1

Chart 4: Total membership, sub-divisions, and cumulative parliamentary seat won (since 2004) in PKR by states

PKR membership, seats won, sub-divisions by state



The geographical concentration of PKR members and its successes is closely linked to the leaders and how they mobilise the ground.

Selangor was the birthplace of PKR’s activist and intellectual groups, including co-founder Syed Husin Ali, and was expectedly the first state that PKR governed. The state also has the largest PKR membership (Table 4 and Chart 4) by a huge margin, and it has won the most parliamentary seats for PKR since inception.

The East Malaysian states are ranked second and third largest despite PKR’s varied success there. In Sarawak’s case, this is due to the tireless efforts of environmental and human rights lawyers setting up base to fight the regime of former chief minister Taib Mahmud.

Although Perak only has a quarter of Selangor’s membership, it has almost as many sub-divisions, indicating a larger-than-expected grassroots strength, and sizable cumulative seats won. Leaders like Dr Lee Boon Chye were responsible over decades for setting up strong divisions like Gopeng.³¹

Kedah and Kuala Lumpur have been states that overperformed for PKR, i.e. delivering more seats with its comparatively smaller size. Kedah delivered the third-most seats cumulatively, but this plummeted to only one in the recent elections and the party was overtaken by its

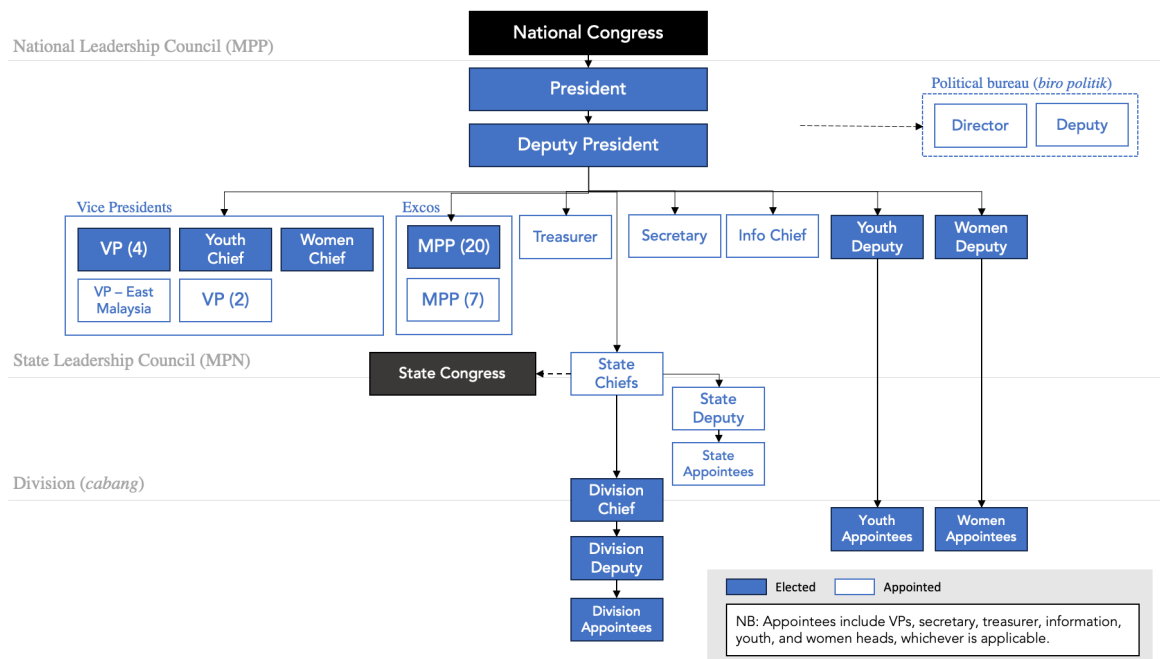
opponents. Terengganu is the only state where PKR has yet to win a parliamentary seat; it did win a state seat in 2013.

Party Structure

The PKR constitution specifies that the highest authority is the national congress (*Kongres Nasional*, KN), while the executive function is carried out by the central leadership council (*Majlis Pimpinan Pusat*, MPP)(Chart 5).³² This hierarchy is followed by the separate wings (youth and women), state leadership council (*Majlis Pimpinan Negeri*, MPN),³³ and the basic unit of division (*cabang*), which requires a minimum 100 people to be set up.^{34 35} Other than that, the MPP has authority to create by-invitation political bureaus (*biro politik*) covering administrative and policy areas.³⁶

This makes PKR’s structure quite similar to UMNO’s. In fact, before 2008, PKR’s Malay terminology of its bodies was similar to UMNO’s, calling divisions *bahagian*, its state leadership council *Badan Perhubungan Negeri*, and its central leadership council *Majlis Tertinggi*, and members *anggota* instead of *ahli*, as is the case today. However, these terminologies were changed to be closer to that of Indonesia, in order to be more democratic and to be devoid of phrases such as ‘*tertinggi*’ (highest), together with the ‘one person, one vote’ direct election system introduced at the same time.³⁷

Chart 5: Organisation structure of PKR
(See Appendix 2 for PKR’s president and deputy presidents since 1999)



In practice, the KN is merely symbolic in passing resolutions on major directions that have been agreed to by the MPP, prior to the KN.^{38 39} Examples of these major directions include the merger with PRM,⁴⁰ the campaign to Free Anwar from prison, and the coalition with other parties to form Pakatan Rakyat and Pakatan Harapan. This is not unusual as the highest

Congress typically serves as a place to obtain legitimacy for a decision and boost members' morale,⁴¹ rather than functioning as a debating and negotiating forum.⁴²

In the MPP, the most powerful decisionmaker is the president, followed by the deputy president, vice-presidents, heads of wings, and the 20 MPPs.⁴³ PKR is the first party to specify a three-term limit for its president; the only other party with a similar restriction is DAP.⁴⁴ Interestingly, PKR's constitution does not describe the president's powers, unlike other parties that describes the president or equivalent as 'main leader' or 'head'.⁴⁵ This may mean that future PKR presidents may rely on precedents to determine the limits of their power.

Additionally, the MPN, like the sub-divisions (*ranting*), are not registered with the Registrar of Societies, thus they do not carry as much power as the division.^{46 47} MPN's role is mainly to organise and coordinate state-level programmes. However, the separation between national and state elections means that the MPN has increasing negotiation power in deciding election and state minister candidates, as the president and election director will largely account for the MPN leaders' views.⁴⁸

A division's strength comes down to how likely it can negotiate for a candidate to be nominated in an election.⁴⁹ The first criterion is whether the seat is considered a winnable seat,⁵⁰ and PKR's strongholds have traditionally been in mixed urban or semi-urban seats, with Selangor as its core.

Second, divisions with large membership tend to have more power, as they hold the leverage of mobilisation.⁵¹ Third is whether the leadership considers the seat strategic for training good outsider candidates, like Lembah Pantai,⁵² Wangsa Maju and Bandar Tun Razak.⁵³ For division-level activities, its division leaders have complete authority; whereas for election nomination, their inputs are considered but not guaranteed anything more than that.

Over the years, the influence of divisions has waned. This is partly due to the introduction of an open system where members can submit nominations online, potentially bypassing a division's preference. Anwar's dual position as prime minister and PKR president also means that his increased influence creates greater centralisation in decision-making, giving lesser say to divisions.⁵⁴

Finance

Although PKR is the second largest party in Malaysia, its main revenue source is donations from its elected representatives—a mandatory 20 per cent cut from their salaries⁵⁵—accounting for 57.3 per cent of the total revenue of 2019.⁵⁶ The other sources of revenue are public donations (24.3 per cent), fundraising dinners (17.3 per cent), and membership fees (1.1 per cent).⁵⁷ The total revenue per year appears lower than for other parties; the party does not have assets or revenue-generating business activities like UMNO or MCA.

In the past, the only significant revenue-generating activity was the sale of the party newspaper, *Suara Keadilan*, which at its height sold 180,000 copies per week. Recently, PKR started a cooperative to generate revenue, called Koperasi KEADILAN Berhad (KIRA).⁵⁸ The party's

cost structure is lean, with minimal party headquarters upkeep, only requiring additional firepower during elections.^{59 60}

THE LARGEST PARTY ELECTION: ONE PERSON, ONE VOTE

At its inception, PKR had adopted the delegate system to elect its leaders like other parties. Every year, around 2,000 delegates voted for the highest leadership, including the president, at the KN (Table 5).

Table 5: PKR’s party election system since inception

Period	Pre-2010	2010-2021	2022-
Party election system	Delegate system	One-person, one-vote system	Hybrid system

This changed in 2009, when the KN passed a resolution to make PKR the first mainstream party to implement the one-person-one-vote (OPOV) direct election system. This is a comprehensive system to elect division leaders to the MPP, including the president, deputy president, and vice-presidents.⁶¹ The premise for OPOV at that time was to stamp out ‘unhealthy practices’ of money politics⁶² and ‘phantom divisions’ that happened in other parties.⁶³

The OPOV system created the most expansive voting system among all parties, giving up to 122 votes to eligible members, including voting for the president (see Table 6).

Table 6: Eligibility to vote and maximum eligible votes before and after the amendment to introduce a hybrid election system (mix of direct election and delegate system)

Levels	Type of positions	Eligible to vote? (2010-2021)	Eligible to vote? (from 2022)	Total eligible votes (2010-2021)	Total eligible votes (from 2022)
MPP	Top Six (President, Deputy President, 4 Vice-Presidents)	Yes	Yes	6	6
	20 exco-level MPPs	Yes	No	20	0
	Youth (national) Top 5 (Chief, Deputy, 3 vice)	Yes	Yes	5	5
	Youth (national) 20 excos	Yes	No	20	0
	Women (national) Top 5 (Chief, Deputy, 3 vice)	Yes	Yes	5	5
	Women (national) 20 excos	Yes	No	20	0
Division (cabang)	Top Three (Head, Deputy, Vice)	Yes	Yes	3	3
	15 division-level excos	Yes	Yes	15	15
	Youth (division) top 3 (Chief, Deputy, Vice)	Yes	Yes	3	3
	Youth (division) 15 excos	Yes	Yes	15	15
	Women (division) top 3 (Chief, Deputy, Vice)	Yes	Yes	3	3
	Women (division) 7 excos	Yes	Yes	7	7
Maximum eligible votes				122	62

NB: Voters are only eligible to vote according to their eligibility, i.e. a 20-something member could vote for the MPP and division for the highest excos and the youth leaders, but not vote for the women's wing leaders. That means a young female member would have the highest maximum eligible votes.

When run efficiently and credibly, the OPOV system is a source of strength. The selection is more competitive—the VP contest is always crowded⁶⁴—and PKR leaders' strength is assessed in a 'survival of the fittest' contest,⁶⁵ creating winners who are likely to be in touch with the national electorate and could mobilise the masses for a common goal.⁶⁶ Direct election also creates a sense of ownership, making members more supportive of the party over time.

However, the logistics and labour overload lead to lengthy campaign and election periods, which may give rise to factionalism and intense rivalry.

Since the presidency, helmed by Anwar Ibrahim (or Wan Azizah in place of him when Anwar was in jail or disqualified), is never contested, the focus—and the factional battles—has always been on the deputy presidency, seen as the heir apparent to Anwar. Teams are formed around the deputy president candidate, and the faction that receives Anwar’s blessing, however indirectly, is seen to have the legitimacy to win.

Table 7: Total days taken to complete the party election process

Year of party election	Total days taken
2010	41 days
2014	135 days
2018	51 days
2022	98 days
Average	81.3 days (or 3 months)

While all parties take at most 2-3 days to complete their leadership selections, PKR takes an average 81.3 days (or 3 months) (Table 7). In 2014, the vicious three-cornered rivalry between Azmin Ali, Saifuddin Nasution, and Khalid Ibrahim took 135 days (~4.5 months) to complete.

Though many party leaders concur that it should be shorter, the length is due to the logistical nightmare, where the party has to organise the way a national election commission would, with a formal body, procedures, rules, coordinators, counting and polling agents, and even police and auditors.⁶⁷ As PKR has presence in all states, with 222 divisions, it also needs to coordinate the voting by states so that the process is managed without instances of manipulation or fraud.⁶⁸

Box 1: Sample briefing materials of PKR party election

Briefing for PKR Party Election (Sample, 2022)

- Administration of voting
- Documents and equipment for voting
- Methods of voting
- Date of voting
- Voting manual
- Voting day physical plan
- Voting rules
- Voting procedure
- Campaign code of ethics

Efforts have been made in recent years to ease this burden. First, PKR adopted a hybrid selection system for the first time in 2022,⁶⁹ where the executive committees at the national and division levels are chosen by delegates (see Table 6 above). This halves the maximum

votes available to the members, which had proven to be too many for members in the first place ('over-democracy').⁷⁰ Two, introducing online voting (via the 'ADIL' application) that will minimise logistics and potential cheating. In 2022, more than half the eligible members voted online, and this method may prove vital in handling the volume in future elections.⁷¹

These recent innovations to the party election system may increase the turnout rate, which has hovered around 15-20 per cent since 2010.⁷² At the minimum, they have helped PKR reduce the campaign and election period to merely 2 weeks, massively scaling down the effort required.

PKR leaders have suggested external assistance, including from the national election commission, to ease the burden of logistics, especially as most involved in the party elections are volunteers with varying experience and organising skills.⁷³ However, PKR needs to overcome the low turnout rate and persistent factionalism in party elections before it can derive the full benefits of party democracy.

ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE: DIVERSITY AS THE WINNING FORMULA

To date, PKR remains the only party to have won at least a parliamentary or state seat in every Malaysian state.⁷⁴ It is also the only party to have a division in every parliamentary seat in the country⁷⁵—a feat not even the oldest party, UMNO, has achieved. This implies that PKR pursues diversity not in a 'tokenistic' sense, but as a meaningful factor.⁷⁶

To an extent, this is by design. Not only was diversity an explicit aim of the party at its formation,⁷⁷ ⁷⁸ it is also included in the constitution. Article 21.7 of the PKR constitution gives the president appointment powers of key positions, including the vice-presidents, secretary-general, treasurer, information chief and others. Among the vice-presidents, the constitution requires at least one leader to be from East Malaysia as an in-built diversity requirement. It is also common for the leadership to appoint any ethnic group underrepresented in the line-up.⁷⁹ Unlike Gerakan and DAP that started out as a more balanced multiracial party that reflected the national composition but eventually changed, PKR continued with its multiracial makeup at every level of its leadership, down to the divisions and political bureaus.⁸⁰

PKR's stronghold lies in mixed and Malay-majority seats in urban and semi-urban areas (Table 8). The ethnic background of its MPs largely mirrors the population (with the exception of East Malaysia) (Table 9), giving it flexibility to contest on a diverse spectrum.

Table 8: PKR stronghold demographics

PKR stronghold demographics	
Total stronghold seats	40
Malay majority	67.5 per cent
Mixed or non-Malay majority	32.5 per cent
Urban	62.5 per cent
Semi urban	37.5 per cent
Rural	0 per cent
Malay population mean (per cent)	54.7 per cent
Chinese population mean (per cent)	30.3 per cent
Indian population mean (per cent)	11.0 per cent

NB: Stronghold as seats won at least twice by PKR

Table 9: Ethnic profile between PKR elected MPs and Malaysia’s national population

Ethnic group	PKR MPs’ ethnic profile (2022)	Malaysia’s national ethnic profile (2022)⁸¹
Malay	58 per cent	53.5 per cent
Chinese	25 per cent	21.0 per cent
Indian	13 per cent	6.1 per cent
Bumiputera Sabah and Sarawak	3 per cent	11.3 per cent

Nomination data in 2013 reveal that PKR was uniquely positioned to face the Malay, Indian, and Chinese parties of Barisan Nasional, showing that it was ‘walking the walk’ in its multiracial pursuit, extending to even East Malaysia.⁸²

However, even among the Malay-majority seats that PKR contests in, the Malay population is barely over half, indicating that PKR has had limited success in courting Malay votes, and often relied heavily on strong non-Malay support to win. Furthermore, its strength in East Malaysia, especially Sarawak, has been eroded drastically after the Sheraton Move, as many key indigenous figures such as Baru Bian and See Chee How had gone on to form separate parties to fight for local causes. PKR’s partnership with the dominant GPS coalition with the present unity government will further dilute PKR’s strength in Sarawak.

Anwar’s approach has always been to merge and accommodate different beliefs under one roof. While party leaders are confident that PKR is unlikely to abandon its multiracial core to please Malay voters,⁸³ the recent erosion of influence at the 2023 state elections is cause for concern.⁸⁴

It could be argued that PKR’s previous electoral successes have been largely due to voters’ anger towards corruption—most serious during the 1MDB crisis between 2016-2018—which coincided with the growth of Malay parties and multi-cornered fights that split the Malay votes. PKR has always benefited from fence-sitter swing votes, but that also makes it vulnerable when Malay votes converge to a dominant Malay party. PKR’s potential electoral upside can only be captured if it first defends its core and then manages to win enough Malay votes.⁸⁵

REFLECTIONS

Since its inception, PKR has been a party unafraid of taking big bets on the shape of society in years to come. One of its biggest bets—the OPOV system—has both yielded positive (rapid membership growth) and negative (factionalism) outcomes. The lower barrier to entry and expectation of rewards increased membership rapidly, but they remain under-mobilised, as evident in the low membership fee collection and turnout rates. The long-drawn party election has also exacerbated factionalism, typically centred on the vicious battle for deputy presidency, a position seen as the one that an heir apparent would hold, below the uncontested position of president.

Its second biggest bet was to establish a multiracial party in a meaningful sense. Its leadership, candidates, and representatives consistently reflect a multiracial mix,^{86 87} and this has given PKR an electoral flexibility and edge to compete at mixed and Malay-majority seats. Gaps, however, still exist, especially in its dissipated East Malaysia influence, besides its youth and Chinese membership.

PKR's mobilisation strength and multiracial depth will ultimately affect its electoral performance, beyond its leadership's strength in setting the narrative. The challenge for the party is to stay on course long enough for teething problems, however extended, to be resolved so that it becomes a party that succeeds in practising what it preaches.

APPENDIX 1

Party	Founding year
United Malay National Organisation (UMNO)	11 May 1946 ⁸⁸
Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS)	24 November 1951
Democratic Action Party (DAP)	11 October 1965
People’s Justice Party (PKR)	10 December 1998
National Trust Party (Amanah)	16 September 2015
Malay United Indigenous Party (PPBM or Bersatu)	8 September 2016

APPENDIX 2

Year	President	Year	Deputy President
1999 - 2018	Wan Azizah Wan Ismail	1999 – 2001	Chandra Muzaffar
		2001 – 2007	Abdul Rahman Othman
		2007 – 2010	Syed Husin Ali
2018 – present	Anwar Ibrahim	2010 - 2020	Mohamed Azmin Ali
		2020 – 2022	<i>Vacant</i>
		2022 – present	Rafizi Ramli

ENDNOTES

¹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/443787>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TtD3dFTT-4g&themeRefresh=1>

³ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/3882>

⁴ Interview with Khoo Boo Teik (19 October 2023, 9.00am).

⁵ The only seat won by PKR in 2004—and the opposition—was Anwar Ibrahim’s stronghold seat of Permatang Pauh in Penang, which was won by Anwar’s wife, Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail.

⁶ Article 12.1 of the PKR party constitution.

⁷ Article 6.1 of the PKR party constitution.

⁸ Article 6.2 of the PKR party constitution.

⁹ Changed in 2019 at the party congress.

<https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/politik/2019/06/576550/had-umur-keahlian-penurunan-kuasa-kepada-negeri-antara-pindaan>

¹⁰ Article 11(3) of PAS party constitution states that a member has to be ‘aqil baligh’ by Islamic laws, meaning the age of puberty. The Federal Territories mufti determined this to be age 15. See: <https://muftiwp.gov.my/ms/artikel/irsyad-fatwa/irsyad-fatwa-umum/2460-irsyad-al-fatwa-siri-ke-230->

[umur-baligh-menurut-4-mazhab-dan-had-umur-yatim](#). However, members as young as 13 years old are also allowed to register, depending on interpretation of the ‘age of puberty’.

¹¹ Article 10.1 of the PKR party constitution. Fees payable to the treasurer of the respective divisions or whoever the central leadership committee assigns. This payment is waived for lifetime members.

¹² Including RM3.00 yearly fees, RM5.00 for membership card, and RM2.00 for registration. See:

<https://berita.pas.org.my/veteran-umno-serahkan-borang-keahlian-pas-jom-semua-jadi-ahli-pas/>

¹³ Raised from RM5.00 per annum to RM10.00, starting 1 September 2018. See:

<https://dapmalaysia.org/>

¹⁴ Article 6.3 of PKR party constitution.

¹⁵ Based on the 2020 annual report by PKR, the estimated collection of membership fees in 2019 of RM78,250 for approximately a million members is only less than 5 per cent.

¹⁶ Article 5 of PAS party constitution and Article 3 of the UMNO party constitution.

¹⁷ This refers to broad female participation rather than to any specific requirement.

¹⁸ <https://www.kosmo.com.my/2022/03/18/jumlah-terkini-ahli-umno-3391236-orang/>

¹⁹ Official party source of PKR.

²⁰ Terengganu, Kedah, Kelantan, and Selangor leading the states. See:

<https://harakahdaily.net/index.php/2022/09/04/ahli-pas-berjumlah-1005700-sehingga-ogos-lalu/>

²¹ <https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/178748/berita/politik/bersatu-rekod-563524-ahli-setakat-ini>

²² <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/politik/2019/12/635941/ahli-amanah-sudah-cecah-200000-orang>

²³ <https://dapmalaysia.org/laporan-jawatankuasa-tertinggi-pusat-2022/>

²⁴ PKR’s secretary-general confirmed that PKR received a total of 78,093 applications between November 2021 to January 2022. See: <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2022/02/01/pkr-received-more-than-70000-membership-applications-since-nov-24-2021-says-sec-gen>

²⁵ “Our divisions that are poor remained poor.” Interview with a PKR youth exco of a division (2 November 2023).

²⁶ Interview with several PKR members (November 2023).

²⁷ Interview with PKR division leader from Johor (15 November 2023).

²⁸ <https://www.hmetro.com.my/mutakhir/2020/03/554749/pkr-kelantan-nafi-10000-ahli-keluar-parti>

²⁹ Interview with PKR MP from Johor (8 November 2023, 8.34pm).

³⁰ Interview with former PKR MP (15 November 2023, 10.54pm).

³¹ Many non-Malay talents have come out of Gopeng including minister Chang Lih Kang, political secretary to the prime minister, Chan Ming Kai, elected representatives Simon Ooi, Tan Kar Hing, and Sandra Ng.

³² Article 1.3 and 17.1 of PKR party constitution.

³³ Article 27 to 31 of PKR party constitution.

³⁴ Article 32 to 40 of PKR party constitution.

³⁵ Article 32.2 of PKR party constitution on a minimum 100 members to set up a division.

³⁶ Examples of political bureaus include national elections, party elections, policy, strategy, mobilization, discipline, communications, NGOs, health, international, workers, farmers etc. Full list for the 2022-2025 term could be found here: <https://keadilanrakyat.org/info-parti/struktur-organisasi-parti/>

³⁷ Interview with a former PKR MP (November 2023).

³⁸ Interview with several PKR leaders and members (November 2023).

³⁹ Changes to the constitution are typically decided at the MPP level, sometimes with committee-level discussions if further negotiations are needed.

⁴⁰ Kongres Nasional at the early stage acted as a tiebreaker to decide on this major issue as there were strong opposition by certain factions. The two-third majority required at KN took a few rounds of discussions before concluding with a decision to move ahead with the merger.

⁴¹ Interview with PKR youth exco of a division (2 November 2023).

- ⁴² Reason for this is practicality, as major decisions cannot be made based on the views of 1.16 million members, as mentioned in an interview with a PKR MP (15 November 2023, 10.54pm).
- ⁴³ One of the most senior appointments is the Secretary-General position, who is in charge of the most significant administrative matters including party membership and meetings.
- ⁴⁴ DAP passed the presidential term limit in 2019 into Article X (2)(b) of the party constitution (see here: <https://dl.dapmalaysia.org/repository/consti-m-april-24.pdf>). UMNO's Zahid Hamidi mentioned a two-term presidential limit as part of the election promise in 2018 and 2020 but this did not pass. PAS has no such restrictions.
- ⁴⁵ PAS's Article 26(1)(a) calls its president the 'head' of implementation; UMNO's Article 9.8 describes the responsibilities of the president and calls the president the 'main leader'; DAP's Article X(2)(a) talks about how the executive power lies in the hands of the secretary-general.
- ⁴⁶ Interviews with several PKR leaders and members.
- ⁴⁷ Another reason for this is that it is the division leaders who will be attending the national congress and not the state leadership council, thus giving more power to the former.
- ⁴⁸ Members believe that aspirants will stand a better chance of nomination if they have the blessing of the MPN leaders. Interview with PKR youth exco of a division (2 November 2023).
- ⁴⁹ A division corresponds with a parliamentary seat, meaning that PKR has 222 divisions in a maximum number of 222 parliamentary seats. This arrangement is similar to UMNO's.
- ⁵⁰ In the Kuala Lumpur region, seats like Titiwangsa, Segambut, and Cheras are never considered strong divisions since they are strongholds of other parties. Consequently, many division members from there would transfer to the nearest winnable division.
- ⁵¹ Interview with former PKR MP (15 November 2023, 10.54pm).
- ⁵² Outsider candidates in the past include Anwar's daughter, Nurul Izzah, and Fahmi Fadzil.
- ⁵³ Another exceptional reason for division strength is the talent honing impact. This is obvious for Gopeng, where Dr Lee Boon Chye honed many talents in his division who had assumed state and national office, with the most notable being the minister Chang Lih Kang. Gopeng is the only division that has managed to capture both parliament and state seats under its division.
- ⁵⁴ The recent election director has also come up with more guidelines for divisions such as a certain percentage of election machinery mobilization, programmes and activities at the division, instead of merely gauging social media popularity.
- ⁵⁵ It is unclear if this is strictly enforced and whether there are repercussions for representatives who do not pay on time or at all.
- ⁵⁶ Annual Report for the 15th PKR Congress, which details their financials for 2019.
- ⁵⁷ This appears aligned to their party constitution under Article 13.1 on revenue sources.
- ⁵⁸ <https://www.kira.com.my/>
- ⁵⁹ Interview with former PKR MP (15 November 2023, 10.54pm).
- ⁶⁰ Members, however, note that the difference in resources to their opponents were obvious, where PN could run 'smarter' and 'more stylish' campaigns, with higher resolution, while PKR had to rely on recycled flags and minimal billboards.
- ⁶¹ Passed at the same congress was a list of radical reforms including: Limiting presidential term to 3 terms, reducing maximum age of the youth wing from 40 to 35 years old, and committing to reaching 30 per cent of female candidates at the party leadership. See: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/139109>
- ⁶² 'You can't bribe 1.2 million voters.' Interview with PKR MP in Selangor (12 October 2023, 8.46pm).
- ⁶³ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/135243> and <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x36df18>
- ⁶⁴ PKR's VP contest candidates for the past four cycles: 19 in 2010, 16 in 2014, 12 in 2018, and 17 in 2022.
- ⁶⁵ Interview with PKR division leader from Johor (15 November 2023).
- ⁶⁶ <https://thenutgraph.com/whats-pkr-elections-all-about/>
- ⁶⁷ Official PKR election document in 2022 distributed to volunteers during briefing.

⁶⁸ Key administrators of a PKR election include an election committee, state coordinator, voting booth administrator (*penyelaras tempat undi*), chief supervisor, election officer, police, and auditor.

⁶⁹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/613609>

⁷⁰ To help manage this choice paralysis, a ‘cai’ system (list) is introduced in almost all party elections so that members could vote according to which team or faction the candidates belong. Some have argued that this practice is unhealthy as it reduces agency in the voters’ choice.

⁷¹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/613609>

⁷² <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/622426>

⁷³ Part of the reason why the members in charge of party election are not the most equipped as it is generally hard to find leaders who have no ambition, no interest to contest in any position, as that level of independence is a necessary ingredient for being an impartial party election official. (Interview with a former PKR MP (15 November 2023, 10.54pm)).

⁷⁴ The Terengganu seat that PKR has won was from the Bandar state seat which was won in GE13 (2013) by Azan Ismail.

⁷⁵ Interview with a PKR MP in Johor (November 2023).

⁷⁶ Interview with a former PKR MP (15 November 2023, 10.54pm).

⁷⁷ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/16581>

⁷⁸ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/33166>

⁷⁹ For instance, the deputy secretary-general would typically consist of all three major races for balance.

⁸⁰ It is common for PKR leaders to ensure the multiracial composition is protected, either in campaign teams or leadership lineup. For instance, the previous youth chief, Akmal Nasir, appointed an Indian youth chief in Johor and Melaka, a Chinese youth chief in Selangor, and Malay youth chiefs in other states.

⁸¹ Population Table: Malaysia. Source: https://open.dosm.gov.my/data-catalogue/population_population_malaysia

⁸² <https://theasiadialogue.com/2013/04/29/ethnic-politics-and-the-challenge-of-pkr/>

⁸³ Interview with several PKR members and leaders (November 2023).

⁸⁴ In the 2023 state election, PKR lost 1 seat in Negeri Sembilan, 5 seats in Kedah, 7 seats in Penang, and 12 seats in Selangor from its incumbency.

⁸⁵ <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/09/02/minister-moots-more-mixed-seats-as-salve-for-racial-politics-woes/1786395>

⁸⁶ Interviews with several PKR members (November 2023).

⁸⁷ The race breakdown differs from division to division, with some divisions like Batu Pahat representing ethnicity closer to the national breakdown.

⁸⁸ The new UMNO party that replaced the old one was formed on 13 February 1988 after the latter was ruled to be illegal by the courts.

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