

PERSPECTIVE

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A Complicated Political Reality Awaits the Malays

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- After its impressive electoral triumph in the 2018 general election, the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition suffered three back-to-back by-election defeats at the hand of the Barisan Nasional (BN) in 2019 in Peninsular Malaysia.
- Opposition parties UMNO and PAS cooperated and won in the Cameron Highland, Semenyih, and Rantau by-elections. Issues concerning Malay rights, the institution of the Malay rulers, and the role of Islam were central to their campaign.
- This paper examines whether PH's recent poor showing in Peninsular Malaysia manifests a decline in support, particularly among the Malays. It argues that although the by-election results are not representative of sentiments across Malaysia, they demonstrate how the opposition can thwart PH's reform efforts by playing up issues concerning Malay identity.
- The emerging discourse serves as a reminder to the PH government that while it seeks to reform the economy, settle the country's debt, and reform institutions, it has to deal with the disgruntled Malay ground. Still, PH's pragmatic and ideologically ambiguous coalition may serve its purpose in the long run, especially in a more diverse Malaysia not only divided by race, but by class as well.

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INTRODUCTION

On 9 May 2018, the Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope or PH) coalition swept to power in Malaysia, promising to reform government institutions, lower costs of living, tackle corruption, and charge individuals linked to the 1MDB (1 Malaysian Development Bank) scandal. The victory was a remarkable achievement for PH, led by 92-year old Mahathir Mohamad, which ended 61 years of Barisan Nasional (National Front or BN) rule. While PH championed multiculturalism, some quarters within the coalition assured the Malays that their special rights are protected, along with Islamic institutions, and the Malay royal houses. In fact, parties such as the DAP (Democratic Action Party) and PKR (People's Justice Party) that have for decades been championing multiculturalism and rethinking affirmative action for the Malays, joined forces with Mahathir's PBBM (Malaysian United Indigenous Party, or Bersatu), which basically continues to profess Malay dominance. Bersatu is a splinter of UMNO (United Malays National Organization) which is the leading party for BN coalition.

Some surveys indicate that in GE14, the number of Malays voting for BN (UMNO) was about five percent more than those who voted for PH and for PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia).¹ According to Merdeka Centre report, BN received 35-40 % votes from the Malays, while PAS received 30-33% and PH 25-30%.²

After its victory in GE14, PH continued its winning streak in four by-elections: in Sungai Kandis (state seat in Selangor), Seri Setia (state seat in Selangor), Balakong (state seat in Selangor) and Port Dickson (federal parliament seat in Negeri Sembilan). Out of these victories, the first two were significant because PH candidates won against candidates backed by UMNO and PAS. As a result, many played down the significance of the alliance between the Malay nationalist party and the Islamist party. Co-operation in GE14 between the two parties had not materialized, although PAS strengthened its footing in the east coast states of Kelantan and Terengganu. The Port Dickson by-election was also not a good indicator to determine the success or failure of the UMNO-PAS alliance because it served as a platform for Anwar Ibrahim, the so-called "prime minister in waiting", to make a comeback into parliament. Nevertheless, the UMNO-PAS collaboration in by-elections held in 2019—namely Cameron Highlands (federal parliament seat for Pahang), Semenyih (state seat for Selangor), and Rantau (state seat for Negeri Sembilan)—proved to be more costly for PH. Is this a sign that race and religious politics are gaining momentum again? Or is this sentiment specific to Malay majority seats? Or is PH suffering from a by-election phenomenon, where voters tend to vote for the opposition knowing that this will not alter the power balance in the federal and state governments?

This paper argues that PH should not take the UMNO-PAS cooperation for granted because their success reflects the sentiments of disgruntled Malays across the country. While the government has the mandate to reform institutions, the economy, and tackle corruption, it cannot ignore the politicization of identity, particularly Malay rights and Islam. Politicization of identity can also pit the government against the Malay rulers, a symbolic yet powerful group that can alter the political balance of power in favour of BN.

2018 BY-ELECTIONS: THE BEGINNING OF UMNO-PAS COLLABORATION

In 2018, four by-elections were held after GE14. The first was for the seat of Sungai Kandis, a state legislative assembly seat in Selangor. PH candidate Zawawi Ahmad managed to retain the seat for the government in a three-cornered fight against BN and an independent candidate.³ All of 72 percent of voters in this urban seat are Malays. In this election, PAS decided not to contest, paving the way for UMNO to fight a straight battle with PH. The agreement was that UMNO would reciprocate by not contesting the subsequent Seri Setia by-election, allowing PAS to battle PH in a straight fight there.

For the Seri Setia seat, also a state seat in Selangor, PH also won the contest comfortably against PAS. Resulting from BN's decision not to contest, PAS increased its vote compared to what it received in GE14. On the same day, another by-election was held in Balakong, which is also a state seat in Selangor. This election was a straight fight between two Chinese-dominated parties, PH's DAP and BN's MCA. PAS decided not to contest, which meant that it was not only allying with UMNO, but also with other BN parties. PH retained this seat comfortably. Unlike the previous three contests, which are state seats, the last by-election was for the parliament seat of Port Dickson. This election was significant because it marked the return of Anwar Ibrahim into politics, and as a member of parliament. The MP for the seat, Danyal Balagopal Abdullah, made way for Anwar, who is tipped to be the man to replace Tun Dr Mahathir as prime minister. In this seven-cornered fight, UMNO decided to sit out the race. Anwar's serious contenders were PAS candidate Mohd Nazari Mokhtar, and former UMNO and Negeri Sembilan chief minister, Isa Samad. Isa was among three other candidates who contested on the independent ticket.⁴

MALAY UNITY IN 2019 BY-ELECTIONS

BN's performance in by-elections improved in 2019 with three consecutive by-election victories. The first was in the Cameron Highlands by-election, a parliament seat for Pahang. BN fielded an *orang asli* (indigenous people), Ramli Mohd Nor, which was a strategic move given that the community (21 percent) is the third largest ethnic group after Malays (33.5 percent) and Chinese 29.5 percent). PH's candidate was Manogaran Marimutu. In this election, PAS once again kept out of the contest and supported the BN candidate. The by-election, which witnessed a four-cornered fight, was held because BN was declared to have won the seat in GE14 with some elements of bribery.⁵ As it turned out, BN won the seat again, and convincingly with over a 3000 majority margin compared to the 500 majority it won in GE14. However, PH candidate Manogaran claimed that BN played the racial card to secure this victory. Coincidentally, the election was held a few weeks after the death of fireman Muhammad Adib Mohd Kassim, who was injured during clashes in November 2018 at Seaford Sri Maha Mariamman Devasthanam.⁶ The incident created unnecessary tensions between Malays and Hindus, and the fact that it fielded an Indian in this by-election did not help the PH's cause. This victory is important for BN not only because it sought to compensate for past defeats, but also because Pahang is former Prime Minister Najib Razak's home state. There were however other factors that contributed to BN's victory: first, Pahang is an UMNO stronghold, and the party retained control of the state despite losing other key states to PH in GE14; and second, a majority of civil servants, particularly from the security forces who voted before polling day, voted for BN.⁷ More significantly, this was the first by-election that BN won with PAS' support.

Next up for BN was the Semenyih by-election. This was called after the death of incumbent MP Bakhtiar Mohd Nor from Bersatu, a party within the PH coalition. BN managed to win this contest marginally, but it was enough to overturn PH's gains in GE14. To begin with, PH's victory in Semenyih in GE14 was unconvincing. In a four-cornered fight with BN, PAS and Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM), PH won only 50.76 percent of the popular votes and BN came second with 31.34 percent. PH obtained 23,428 votes compared to BN's 14,464 votes. The total voter turnout then was 46,572. A relatively lower voter turnout for the by-election may have contributed to BN's victory. The voter turnout in this by-election is 38, 518. BN's Zakaria Hanafi obtained 19,780 votes (50.44 percent) while PH's Muhammad Aiman Zainalli obtained 17, 866 (45.58 percent). PAS decided not to contest this election, though it remained a four-cornered fight, between PH, BN, PSM and an independent candidate.

What went wrong for PH's campaign? It all boiled down to Muhammad Aiman's inexperience. The 30-year old candidate, who has a PhD in electrical engineering, and is the son-in-law of the late Bakhtiar, is not an orator, and was clearly uncomfortable when taking difficult questions from the media. In contrast, BN's Zakaria, who is in his 50s, is a seasoned politician and a veteran UMNO member.

To be sure, PAS' role in the Semenyih election was ambiguous. There were reports that PAS leaders, including party president Abdul Hadi Awang, met Mahathir a few days before the election. While the purpose of the short meeting was not revealed, Mahathir briefly said that PAS had agreed not to support BN's campaign in Semenyih.⁸ Abdul Hadi later claimed that PAS would support the prime minister should a no-confidence vote be tabled in parliament against his government. Yet, by publicly revealing details about the meeting, Mahathir gave the impression that PH needed PAS support to beat UMNO in Semenyih. In fact, PAS deputy information chief Roslan Shahir contradicted Mahathir's statement by saying that his party would support BN.⁹ And true enough, PAS indirectly supported BN's campaign, resulting in the latter's victory.

On 13 April, PH suffered another defeat resulting from the UMNO-PAS alliance. The by-election was called after the Federal Court dismissed a petition by UMNO acting president and incumbent Member of Parliament (MP) Mohamad Hassan. The seat was declared vacant after the courts found that in GE14, PH candidate Dr S Streram was denied entry into the nomination centre because he had not brought along his candidate pass. The by-election witnessed a four-cornered fight between Mohamad Hassan, Dr S Streram and two independent candidates. The incumbent won the seat convincingly. Again, whether the victory resulted from UMNO-PAS co-operation remains a question, because the seat has been an UMNO stronghold since 1964, and Mohammad Hassan was former Chief Minister. However, identity politics remained BN's card throughout the campaign.

After three straight defeats at the hands of BN, PH finally recorded a by-election victory in 2019 by retaining the Sandakan parliament seat in Sabah. The DAP won the seat for PH with a bigger majority than in GE 14. However, Sandakan is a majority Chinese constituency, and PH has always been the favourites to win there.

A CASE OF DISGRUNTLED MALAYS?

One can argue that some Malays are beginning to feel insecure under the PH government. Again, this statement has to be qualified because the Malays are heterogeneous, and this depends on which state they live in, whether they live in urban areas or rural areas, and which social strata they occupy. However, some Malays have indeed mentioned that the Malays are no longer in power, and that the government is run by the DAP.¹⁰ BN, especially UMNO, also fanned this discourse to their advantage, though at the expense of their partners MCA and MIC. A series of episodes provides strong indication that some segments of the Malay/Muslim community are unhappy with PH, and the way PH conducted itself in recent clashes with important Malay institutions further exacerbated the community's distrust of the government.

A few months after GE14, a number of high-profile UMNO leaders crossed over to join Bersatu. The likes of Mustapa Mohamad and Anifah Aman, former cabinet ministers under the Najib Razak administration, leaving to join Bersatu is a cause for concern for some UMNO grassroots members. Joining Mustapa and Anifah was Mas Ermieyati Samsudin, a former deputy minister.¹¹ To prevent the further departure of key UMNO leaders, the party took swift action and pressured acting president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who was also facing corruption charges, to step aside and allow Mohamad Hassan to become caretaker president. Interestingly, BN's performance in the by-elections improved after this leadership change.

After PH came to power in May 2018, it made sweeping changes. The government appointed non-Malays into key positions such as Chief Justice, Attorney General, and Finance Minister. The Prime Minister also indicated that he wanted to scale down the size of the bureaucracy, and rethink the role of the federal Islamic bureaucracy JAKIM. The government had also stopped book-banning, and attempted to engage groups deemed less Islamic: such as the LGBT (lesbian, gays, bisexual and transgender) community.

However, the Malay backlash against PH's decision to ratify the international conventions ICERD and Rome Statue demonstrates that it underestimated the Malay ground. On 8 December 2018, about 55,000 Malays marched in the streets of Kuala Lumpur to express their unhappiness with PH's move to ratify the United Nations (UN) International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination. Ratifying the convention, according to BN and PAS politicians, also means denying the rights of the Malays and belittling the status of Islam in the country. The Prime Minister had incidentally made the promise that Malaysia would ratify the convention in a speech he made at the UN general assembly in 2018. The government backtracked after sensing that the Malay ground was not pleased with the move, and this was done before the mass protest. Thus, the purpose of the march was later changed to express thanksgiving to the government's effort, but UMNO and PAS leaders cleverly rode on the protests to demonstrate their political alliance.

Another issue on which PH had to backpedal was the signing of the Rome Statue. The government initially agreed to be a signatory of the international agreement which recognizes that crimes such as genocide, humanity, war crimes can be investigated by the International Criminal Court even though states disagree with the claims. The Prime Minister himself argued that his government backtracked not because he disagreed with the principles of the agreement, but because some quarters were using the issue to deepen

tensions between the Malay rulers and the government. Mahathir then emphasized that the rule of law applies to all Malaysians, including the Malay rulers.

Relatedly, Mahathir openly clashed with the Johor ruling family, both the Sultan Ibrahim Ismail and the Crown Prince Ismail Ibrahim (known by the acronym, of his title TMJ). Many thought this was a repeat of the constitutional crisis Malaysia faced during Mahathir's first term with the Malay rulers—in 1983 and 1993—which led to a reduction of immunity for the constitutional monarch. This time, the clash was about who had the right to appoint the Johor chief minister, after the resignation of Osman Sapian. Mahathir insisted it remained in the rights of the political party in power, while the Johor ruler felt it was his prerogative. The issue became a public spat until Home Affairs minister Muhyiddin Yassin said the Johor ruler had the right under the state's law.

CONCLUSION: PH LOSING THE MALAY-ISLAM BATTLE

Judging from the three by-election defeats for PH in 2019, many reckon that Malaysians are getting impatient with unfulfilled promised reforms during its 12 months in power. While there is some truth that PH is losing in the way it communicates with the Malay voters, the by-elections are by no means good indicators of its overall performance. To begin with, BN was the favorite to win in Rantau and Cameron Highlands, and in GE14, while Semenyih was always a close call. The UMNO-PAS link up may seem to have worked well for some quarters in Malaysia, but whether the model is sustainable remains doubtful, especially when the two parties are competing for the same seats, which could trigger infighting at the grassroots level over seat allocation. Ironically, the two parties are moving towards a similar kind of orientation, catering to conservative rightist Malays. They will find it difficult to win in multiracial seats, what more in seats where the Malays are a minority.

The complexity of Malaysian society transcends the ethnic divide to include the class divide, and the intra-religious divide. PH offers a different model that caters to electorate's different needs. The parties in the coalition are mixed, and ideologically, they are pragmatists. DAP appeals to the urban Chinese, PKR in multiracial, and urban seats, Amanah among religious and urban Malays, while Bersatu enjoys support from traditional Malays. The fact that Bersatu is now moving into Sabah shows that it is able to read the ground well. While Warisan, a party in alliance with PH, can obtain the support of Sabahans living in the coastal areas, Bersatu can replace UMNO by targeting the latter's core supporters in the Sabah hinterland. This loose coalition model, where one that does not focus too strongly on ideology, may be the way forward in retaining power in Malaysia.

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- ³ Norshahril Saat, "The Sungai Kandis By-election: A test for the new Pakatan Harapan Administration" *ISEAS Commentary*, 6 August 2018. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/commentaries/item/8059-the-sungai-kandis-byelection-a-test-for-the-new-pakatan-harapan-administration-by-dr-norshahril-saat> (Date Accessed: 17 April 2018).
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- ⁹ Joseph Laos Jr, "PAS says it still supports BN in Semenyih despite 'less commitment'" in the *Star Online* 17 February 2019, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2019/02/17/pas-says-it-still-supports-bn-in-semenyih-despite-less-commitment/> (Date Accessed 9 May 2019)
- ¹⁰ This is based on some conversations with ordinary Malays I have in the state of Perak in February 2019.
- ¹¹ Norshahril Saat, "UMNO revival: reaffirmation of ideology or reform?" *ISEAS Perspective*, No 72, 15 November 2018.

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