

PERSPECTIVE

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The Tanjung Piai By-Election: A Riddle Wrapped in a Mystery?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- On November 16, a by-election will be held in Tanjung Piai in Johor, following the death of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) parliamentarian Farid Rafik. The seat is Malay-majority, but with a sizeable Chinese community, and was narrowly won by PH in May 2018.
- Following a string of three by-election victories, Barisan Nasional (BN) is on an up-swing, and Tanjung Piai is the first seat to be contested following the signing of UMNO's cooperation pact with PAS.
- Assuming preferences remain constant, the pooling of BN and PAS votes would be enough to secure the seat. However, the former ruling coalition's decision to follow past practice in fielding a Malaysian Chinese Association candidate is likely to alienate some Malay voters, especially from PAS.
- After 18 months in power, Pakatan Harapan has less novelty appeal, having struggled to address cost of living issues and many campaign promises. That said, there are substantial benefits to incumbency, and national leaders have been quick to announce new funding and initiatives for the constituency.
- Heavyweights from both coalitions have visited Tanjung Piai, but there are indications that Pakatan Harapan's campaign machinery is being outflanked by Barisan Nasional's well-seasoned grassroots network.
- The field is crowded, with no less than six candidates running. BN's candidate is the former MP for the area, Wee Jeck Seng. Pakatan Harapan has selected Karmaine Sardini, a former UMNO member and Tanjung Piai local. The other four candidates are extremely unlikely to win, although they could siphon support away from the main contenders in unexpected ways.
- The outcome of the election is important, as a win for Pakatan Harapan will restore momentum for the ruling coalition. Conversely, a win for Barisan Nasional will provide legitimization of sorts to UMNO's alliance with PAS and could lead to an increased focus on race and religion.

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INTRODUCTION

The May 2018 General Elections in Malaysia delivered an unexpected verdict, and reconfigured the country's political reality. Benefiting from a 'perfect storm' of unhappiness over the cost of living, the imposition of GST, and the alleged corruption of the Najib Razak administration, Pakatan Harapan (PH) took most parliamentary seats on Peninsular Malaysia's west coast, and made serious inroads into rural Malay-majority seats on the east coast.

Situated on Johor's west coast, Tanjung Piai was one of the Barisan Nasional (BN) constituencies that fell to Pakatan Harapan last year. The seat was narrowly won by Mohd Farid Mohd Rafik of Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM) with a 524 majority, in a contest against BN and the Islamist party, PAS.

Mohd Farid passed away unexpectedly in September, and the seat is now up for re-election. Voting, which will take place on November 16, comes at a difficult time for the ruling coalition. After 18 months in power, the novelty factor has worn off and political anomie has set in, due, in part, to unachieved election pledges on issues such as eliminating highway tolls and restructuring student loans.

Conversely, following a torrid 2018, BN's chances have turned of late, with the ousted coalition racking up three by-elections wins in a row. In September 2019, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the largest party in BN, signed a cooperation pact with PAS, which entails fielding commonly-agreed upon candidates in all electoral contests. The Tanjung Piai by-election is the first following this agreement and, if BN and PAS supporters effectively vote the same way they did in 2018, Pakatan Harapan will lose the seat.

However, while Tanjung Piai is a Malay majority seat, it has a sizeable Chinese community and has traditionally been represented by the BN component party, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). In part to maintain the viability of BN and, in part, because the MCA candidate is well known on the ground, BN has chosen the former MCA MP as the candidate for the Tanjung Piai election – despite intense pressures from UMNO to field one of their own members.

Reflecting the importance of the election, both coalitions have invested considerable political capital in the constituency, with visits from heavyweights like Mahathir Mohamad, Muhyiddin Yassin, Lim Guan Eng and Salahuddin Ayub from Pakatan Harapan, and Zahid Hamidi, Najib Razak, Mohamad Hasan and Wee Ka Siong from Barisan Nasional.²

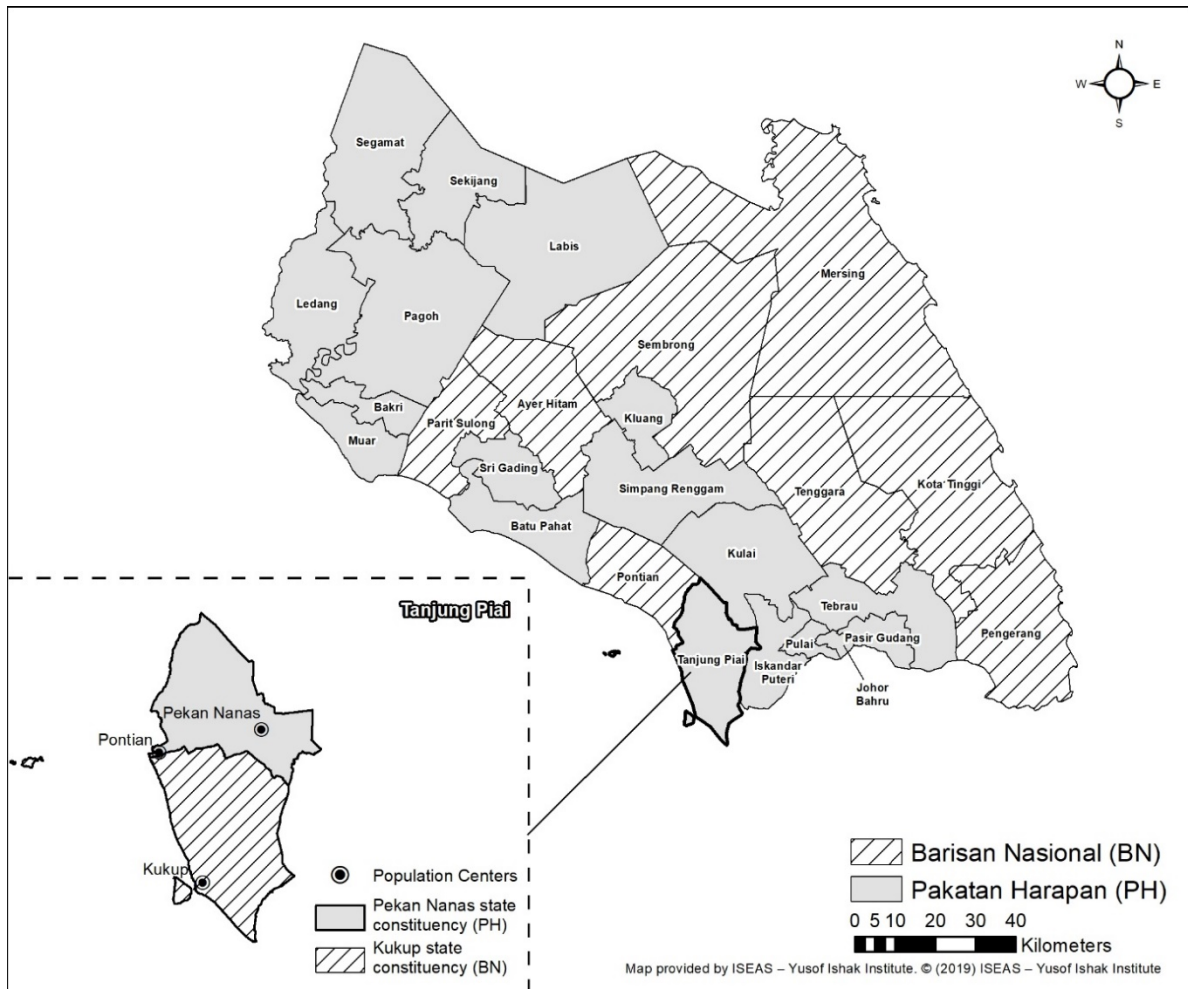
Yet, in a further unexpected turn, the seat is being contested by four other candidates. Two are independents and are unlikely to have much of an impact, but former BN component party Gerakan and former PAS partner Berjasa are both fielding candidates. While extremely unlikely to win, these challengers could draw support away from the main candidates in unexpected measure – thus adding further uncertainty.

THE CONSTITUENCY

Tanjung Piai is a relatively mixed constituency, with some 54,000 voters. About 57 percent of these are Malay, 42 percent Chinese, and one percent Indian. While it is classified as a rural constituency, and its main economic activities are fishing, fruit production and oil palm, it is also quite outward-oriented, with many of its residents commuting to Singapore to work and others depending on tourism from the city-state.

At first blush, Tanjung Piai looks like the typical west coast constituency in Peninsular Malaysia that Pakatan Harapan toppled in 2018. These constituencies are larger, more urbanized and multi-ethnic than those on the Peninsula’s east coast, which are less populated, more rural, and more Malay-majority. Johor exemplifies this division — all of its PH seats are in the urban south and along the western aspect of the state, and BN strongholds are in the state’s centre and east.

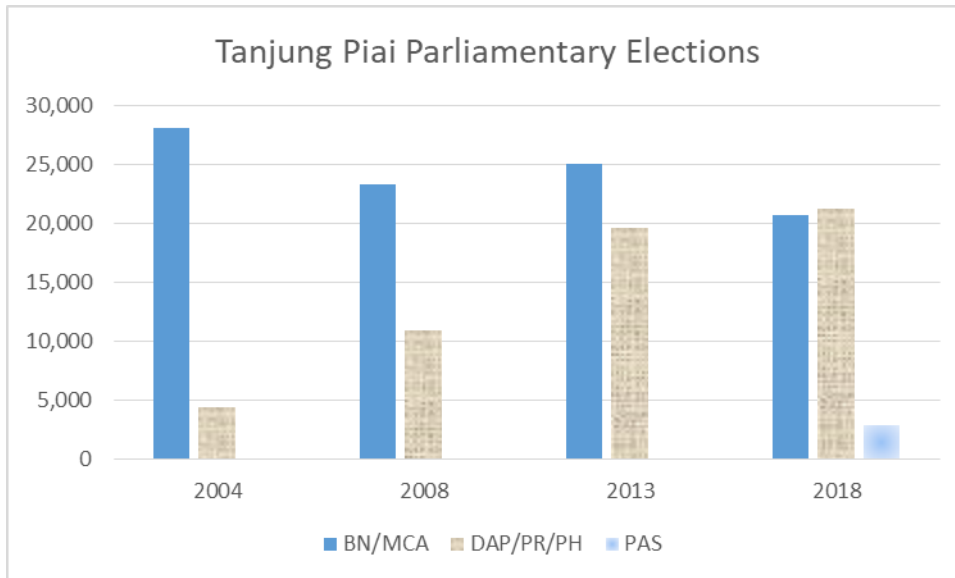
Figure One: Johor Parliamentary Results (2018)



Since 2004, these west coast constituencies have seen steady incursions by the component parties of what is now Pakatan Harapan. The Democratic Action Party (DAP) ran in Tanjung Piai in 2004, 2008, and 2013 – each time against an MCA candidate and each time securing an increasing number of votes. In 2018, DAP ceded the seat to PPBM, and Mohd

Farid was able to secure more than 21,000 votes, narrowly edging out the BN candidate by a mere 524 votes (Figure Two).

Figure Two:



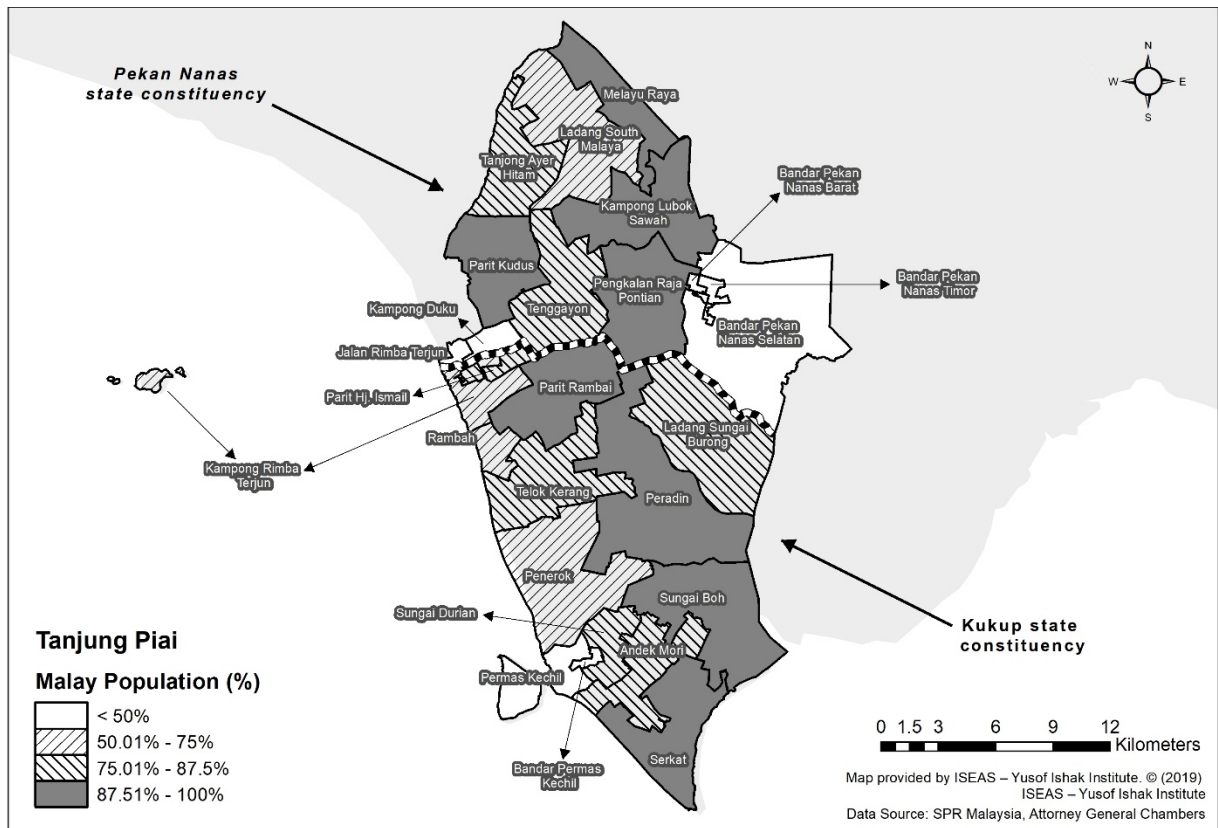
Source: www.undi.info (accessed 9 November, 2019)

Nonetheless, when measured against Pakatan Harapan’s performance against MCA candidates elsewhere in the state in 2018 – this performance is less impressive. PH took the rural seat of Labis by more than 3,000 votes, and obtained a crushing majority in semi-urban Tebrau. In contrast, although MCA’s vote share in Tanjung Piai declined by 25 percent in 2018, it still remained above 20,000 votes.

In part, this could be because Tanjung Piai has had a long association with MCA, which has contested in the constituency since it was established in 2003. However, it is also important to note that PAS ran as a third force in 2018 and managed to garner almost 3,000 votes. These two facts, then, lend weight to UMNO’s strategy of fielding an MCA candidate, yet also reaching out to PAS’s vote base. Assuming that voters in Tanjung Piai vote the same way they did 18 months ago, a BN-PAS front would secure a majority in 2019.

Upon closer examination, this seeming contradiction between the seat’s west coast location and its very narrow win for Pakatan Harapan lies within the constituency itself, and can be seen in the different composition of its state seats (Figure Three). In the north, Pekan Nanas is more multi-ethnic, with 53 percent Malay, 45 Chinese, and one percent Indian voters. The seat is also more urban, with two large towns, Pontian and Pekan Nanas, in the west and east, respectively. Since 2004, MCA and DAP have competed against each other, with DAP prevailing for the first time in 2013 – as it did in 13 other state seats that year.

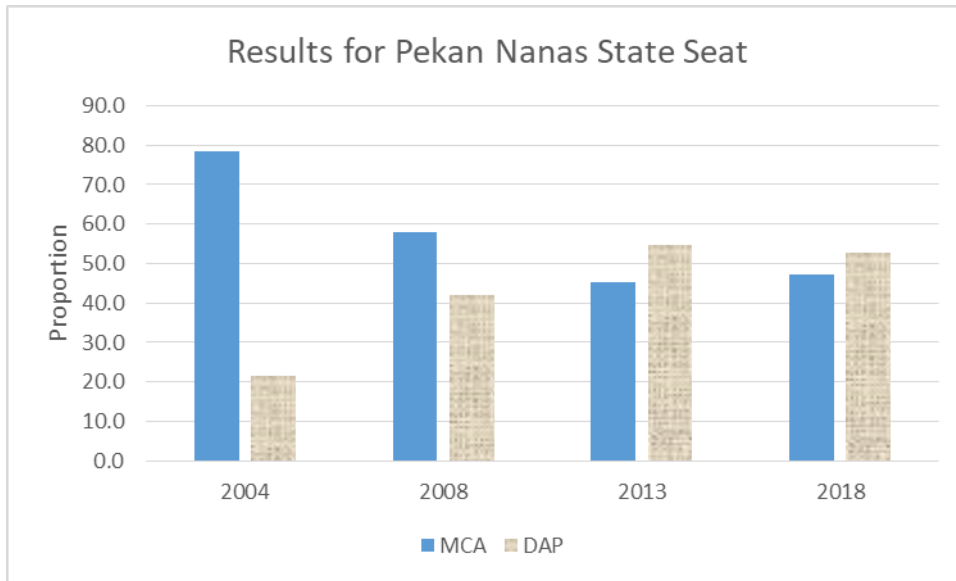
Figure Three: Tanjung Piai by Voting District



Conversely, 60 percent of Kukup’s voters are Malay, 38 percent are Chinese, and one percent are Indian. The seat is currently held by an UMNO member – and has been since 2004. UMNO’s grassroots network is strong in the seat, and more extensive than it is in Pekan Nanas.³ In 2018, the incumbent narrowly prevailed over a Pakatan Harapan member from Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah). Yet, despite Amanah’s credible performance in 2018, it has been PAS that has been consistently fielding candidates in the seat since 2004.

When analysed over time, the results in the two state seats yield interesting findings. With Pekan Nanas, one can see support for the DAP rising and support for MCA declining over the 2004-2013 period. However, in 2018, this trend stops and, while the DAP candidate prevailed, support for that party actually decreased slightly in MCA’s favour. This could mean that Pakatan Rakyat/Harapan had already obtained as many votes as it could in 2013, and some voters in Pekan Nanas opted to move away from the opposition coalition in 2018. Another possibility could be that support for the DAP was reduced by the redelineation exercise, which ceded two voting districts to and absorbed another two from neighbouring Pontian. Regardless of the cause, these findings indicate that Pakatan Harapan’s victory in Tanjung Piai did not come from increased votes in the more urban, multi-ethnic Pekan Nanas seat.

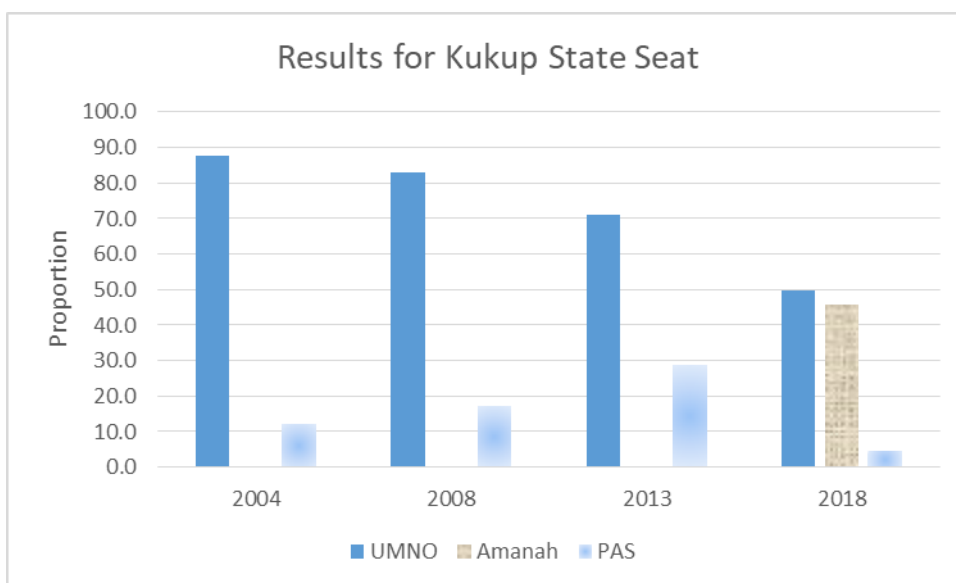
Figure Four:



Source: www.undi.info (accessed 9 November, 2019)

In Kukup, support for the UMNO candidate has been decreasing since 2004. In 2008 and 2013, these votes went to the PAS candidate, then in collaboration with PKR and DAP. Over this period, support for the Islamist party climbed from 12 percent to 29 percent. However, in 2018, the results were very different. While UMNO was able to retain the seat, Amanah polled a very strong second, with votes coming from *both* UMNO and PAS. Thus, UMNO's vote share declined from 70 percent to 49.6 percent, and PAS' support was decimated, falling from 28.8 percent to 4.6 percent.

Figure Five:



Source: www.undi.info (accessed 9 November, 2019)

Assuming that voters in Tanjung Piai and Kukup voted the same way at the parliamentary level in 2018, then there is strong reason to believe that Pakatan Harapan's support that year plateaued in the first state seat and surged in the second. Given the different ethnic composition of the two seats, it is also likely that much of this new support relative to 2013 came from Malay, rather than Chinese voters.

This finding dovetails with a poll carried out by the Institut Darul Ehsan which, in a field survey in the run-up to the May 2018 elections found that some 64 percent of Chinese voters and 32 percent of Malay voters planned to vote for Pakatan Harapan.⁴ Relative to surveys at the national level, this indicated lower than average support for the coalition among Chinese voters and a higher than average support among Malay voters.⁵ Consequently, BN may be overestimating its popularity among Malay voters, and PH may be misjudging its level of Chinese support.

THE CANDIDATES

PH's previous seatholder, Mohd Farid, was from a well-known local Tanjung Piai family. PPBM has sought to maintain this local connection in its choice of Karmaine Sardini, an architect and imam. Karmaine contested in the Pontian parliamentary seat in 2018 – narrowly losing to UMNO's Ahmad Mazlan by some 800 votes. However, before that, he was the UMNO Treasurer for Tanjung Piai, and also played a founding role in establishing PPBM in the constituency.⁶

For its part, Barisan Nasional opted to field the previous MP for Tanjung Piai. Wee Jeck Seng first served as the Assemblyperson for the Pekan Nanas state seat in 2004-2008, before being elected as MP for Tanjung Piai from 2008 to 2018. He cites several achievements during his tenure, including: successfully obtaining 'land titles' for fishing families living in kelongs off the coast; securing funding for smart classrooms in primary schools in the constituency; and providing food supplies to low income families.⁷

Gerakan has nominated its Deputy Secretary General, Wendy Subramaniam, to run. Founded in 1968, Gerakan joined Barisan Nasional in the early 1970s but left the coalition following the 2018 loss. Despite its founding as a multi-racial party, Gerakan has come to be seen as similar to MCA in outlook and membership. The party is seeking to position itself in Tanjung Piai and nationally as a 'third option', capturing support from those unhappy with Pakatan Harapan, but unwilling to vote for Barisan Nasional.⁸

The fourth candidate, Badrulhisham Abdul Aziz, is the President of the Islamist party Barisan Jemaah Islamiah Se-Malaysia (Berjasa). Despite splitting from PAS in 1977, Berjasa joined PAS as a member of the Gagasan Sejahtera coalition that ran against PH and BN in 2018. Badrulhisham has stated that his party is contesting in Tanjung Piai to protest UMNO and PAS fielding a non-Malay to run in the constituency.⁹

The two independents, Faridah Aryani Abdul Ghaffar, a social auditor, and Ng Chuan Lock, the owner of a chain of tuition centres, are also contesting, but are unlikely to have much impact.

THE ISSUES

Opinion surveys carried out prior to the 2018 election indicated that economic issues topped voter concerns, and this has not changed in the months since then. This feeling was frequently voiced by interviewees in Tanjung Piai, which, given its agricultural focus, has a substantial number of Bottom 40 (B40) residents.¹⁰ Consequently, while national-level issues such as Mahathir's attendance at last month's Malay Dignity Congress and the introduction of Khat calligraphy in primary schools are not inconsequential, local issues are pivotal.

At present, many in Tanjung Piai are affected by low prices for oil palm, which decreased significantly in recent years.¹¹ Unlike Eastern Johor, which has a large quantity of FELDA plantations, small holders predominate in Tanjung Piai.¹² This complicates PH efforts to reach out to this group, which is less organized and lacks established networks to articulate demands and administer assistance. Furthermore, Pakatan Harapan's Karmaine Sardini was criticised for stating that despite the recent fall in palm oil prices, smallholders should be "grateful" since the cost of living in rural areas is much lower than in cities.¹³

Fishing is also a key pillar of the local economy, particularly around Kukup town, which has some 600 active fishermen.¹⁴ On October 20, the Minister for Agriculture and Agro-based Industry, Salahuddin Ayub, announced that the government would spend RM 3 million to upgrade fishing jetties in the constituency.¹⁵ However, grassroots party workers have commented that upgrades to the jetty may not address the fundamental problems, which are environmental pollution and sand mining for coastal reclamation.¹⁶

The PH administration has attempted to address the plight of fish breeders in Kukup through a RM 1 million allocation to replenish fish stocks. On November 6, Johor Menteri Besar Sahrudin Jamal announced that fishermen in Southern Johor, including Tanjung Piai, would each receive a RM 1,000 "compassionate payment" since coastal development projects have affected their livelihood.¹⁷

Construction is underway for a RM 600 million bridge across Sungai Pulai, which will connect Tanjung Piai to Port Tanjung Pelepas.¹⁸ In addition to reducing commuting times for those Tanjung Piai residents who work at the port, it is hoped the link will also spur local tourism. The project begun in 2017 under the previous BN administration, but PH has pledged to complete the project.

In another boost for the constituency, on October 9, Minister for Youth and Sports Syed Saddiq announced that the federal government approved a RM 4 million allocation to upgrade sports facilities. Syed Saddiq explained that the allocation had been a request from the late MP Dr Farid.¹⁹

Besides economic issues, healthcare remains a concern among Tanjung Piai residents. There is a large public hospital in neighbouring Pontian. However, some specialist services are not available, prompting residents to seek treatment in Johor Bahru. In addition, there are concerns that the facilities in Pontian are dated and in need of refurbishment.²⁰ The PH administration announced in the October budget that Pontian Hospital would have a new clinic.²¹

The various candidates have sought to distinguish themselves through focusing on specific issues, all with a strong focus on local livelihoods. PH's Karmaine Sardini has pledged to assist residents to set up oyster and catfish breeding farms along the coast, as well as establish a cooperative to help young adults establish small enterprises.²² BN's Wee Jeck Seng has announced that, if elected, he would sponsor umrah for at least 10 low-income Tanjung Piai residents each year.²³ In addition, he has pledged to scale up social welfare programmes in the constituency.²⁴ Gerakan's Wendy Subramaniam promises to champion better healthcare facilities in Tanjung Piai, and also plans to develop the tourism sector as well as encourage firms to establish factories in the constituency.²⁵

Behind the various candidates is, of course, the federal government. The recent "big ticket" allocations have been criticised by civil society groups such as Bersih 2.0 as "fishing for votes", which violate ethical standards.²⁶ Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad responded that the announcements by Syed Saddiq and Salahuddin Ayub merely "coincided" with the timing of Tanjung Piai by-election.²⁷

OUTLOOK

While the generalised feeling is that the Pakatan Harapan administration has been unable to substantially tackle cost of living issues, by-elections often play into the hands of the government of the day. Thus, the federal government has been able to roll out a considerable array of targeted measures for the constituency.

Nonetheless, Pakatan Harapan may be outflanked on the campaign trail. In the early period of campaigning, the ruling coalition was much less present on the ground than Barisan Nasional, which had copious billboards and banners in strategic locations in the seat. In contrast, the campaign machinery for PH was relatively low-key and muted.²⁸ This could be reflective of Pakatan Harapan's smaller and less battle-hardened machinery, and it could also be due to internal PPBM issues. There are rumours that Karmaine Sardini is a member of Muhyiddin Yassin's faction within the party, which could have reduced motivation from other groups to campaign whole-heartedly.²⁹

Conversely, while PAS supporters may be displeased that the Tanjung Piai candidate is not a Muslim, UMNO members are supportive. In contrast to 2018, when party members were unhappy that UMNO did not contest in the seat, this time they are conscious of the strategic importance of the by-election.³⁰ During the nomination process, the delegation accompanying Wee Jeck Seng was quite large, and featured a substantial number of MCA and UMNO members. Conversely, there were relatively few PAS members.³¹

The November 16 contest will in all likelihood be between the candidates from the two national coalitions, Pakatan Harapan and Barisan Nasional. However, every vote counts and the other four candidates will refract votes in unexpected ways. It is very likely that the Berjasa vote will resonate with voters seeking a Muslim candidate for the constituency and, thus, siphon some votes away from BN. The same may be said for the Gerakan candidate, who may appeal to former MCA supporters. Conversely, Pakatan Harapan's vote count is more likely to be affected by apathy and, consequently, a lower voter turnout.

Looking forward, a win by Pakatan Harapan will provide the ruling coalition with a much-needed boost, although it is unclear whether this can be successfully capitalized on. The

prevailing opinion is that the no-longer-so-new administration needs to articulate a narrative to unite the country. At the same time, it is unclear what lessons UMNO would draw from a loss. In the wake of their 2018 defeat, the party did not undergo a process of internal reflection or reform to determine the causes of their loss. There is little reason to think that they would do so now.

Conversely, if Barisan Nasional wins this election, it could embolden UMNO to continue with its conflicting and simultaneous alliance with remnants of Barisan Nasional on one side and PAS on the other. Appeals to race and religion will continue and be particularly pronounced for Malay-majority constituencies.

¹ The authors would like to thank Tan Juen for his excellent GIS work on the maps contained in this article.

² Fieldwork observation in Tanjung Piai, 31 October-2 November, including on nomination day.

³ Interview with UMNO party member, Johor Bahru, 3 November 2019.

⁴ Annabelle Lee, "Tg Piai: Think-tank survey shows Chinese reconsidering Harapan support", *Malaysiakini*, 1 November 2019.

⁵ FMT News "Report: 95% Chinese but less than 30% Malays voted for PH". 14 June 2018.

⁶ Malay Mail, "Tanjung Piai by-election: Clash of agendas between BN and PH", 10 November 2019.

⁷ Interview with Wee Jeck Seng, Pekan Nanas, 31 October.

⁸ Khoo Gek San, "Gerakan offers genuine 3rd option for voters sour on Pakatan, BN", *The Malaysian Insight*, 7 November 2019.

⁹ Syed Jaymal Zahid and Ben Tan. "What is Berjasa's end game in Tanjung Piai", 7 November 2019.

¹⁰ All interviewees regardless of party affiliation commented that economic challenges is the uppermost concern amongst voters in Tg Piai.

¹¹ Vincent Tan, "Malaysia's palm oil growers fall on hard times", Channel News Asia, 12 May 2019.

¹² Interview with MCA party member, Pekan Nanas, 31 October 2019.

¹³ Star Online. "Be grateful for current Palm Oil prices, Pakatan's Karmaine tells smallholders", 4 November 2019, Star Online. "Wee: Karmaine out of touch with reality", 6 November 2019.

¹⁴ Data obtained through interview with local party activists.

¹⁵ Malay Mail. "Tanjung Piai fishing jetties to be upgraded to boost economy says Minister", 20 October 2019.

¹⁶ Interview with Bersatu grassroots members, Kukup, 31 October 2019.

¹⁷ New Straits Times. "Johor fishermen welcome 'Wang Ehsan'", 7 November 2019.

¹⁸ Star Online. "New road will cut travel time", 6 March 2017.

¹⁹ Malay Mail. "Syed Saddiq announces RM4m sports allocation for Tanjung Piai", 19 October 2019.

²⁰ The Sun Daily. "Pontian Municipal Council urged to restore proposed new hospital site", 02 December 2017.

²¹ Star Online. "RM95mil allocation timely as Pontian hospital plans new clinic next year", 12 October 2019.

- ²² Malaysiakini. “Karmaine plans new aquafarming opportunities in Tanjung Piai”, 6 November 2019.
- ²³ Malaysiakini. “Wee promises more umrah trips for old folks if BN wins Tg Piai by-election”, 4 November 2019.
- ²⁴ Interview with MCA party member, Pekan Nanas, 31 October 2019.
- ²⁵ New Straits Times. “Gerakan’s Tg Piai by-election candidate wants to do more”, 5 November 2019.
- ²⁶ New Straits Times. “Bersih: Fishing for fishermen’s votes using state funds is not illegal, but wrong”, 7 November 2019.
- ²⁷ Martin Carvalho, “Dr M defends allocations for Tanjung Piai, says it is a ‘coincidence’”, Star Online, 22 October 2019.
- ²⁸ Fieldwork observation in Tanjung Piai, 31 October- 2 November, including on nomination day.
- ²⁹ Interview with UMNO party member, Johor Bahru, 3 November 2019.
- ³⁰ Interview with UMNO party member, Johor Bahru, 3 November 2019.
- ³¹ Fieldwork observation in Tanjung Piai, 31 October- 2 November, including on nomination day.

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