

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **The Slim By-Election: Pejuang's First and Mahathir's Last Battle?**

*Francis E. Hutchinson and Kevin Zhang\**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- On August 29, a by-election will be held in the Slim state constituency in Perak, a rural Malay-majority seat and UMNO stronghold.
- UMNO will defend its seat against the newly established Parti Pejuang Tanah Air (Pejuang) led by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.
- The three large Malay-based parties of UMNO, PAS, and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM) are deepening ties ahead of a possible snap election.
- Data from the campaign trail suggests that the UMNO-PAS working relationship is operational. PPBM, however, is less integrated into campaign activities but is under pressure to show that it can help drum up support for the UMNO candidate.
- Conversely, a victory for Pejuang, Mahathir's newest party, would serve as a major boost for the senior politician, illustrating that he remains influential among ethnic Malays and securing his role as kingmaker.
- That said, Mahathir's past is coming back to haunt him. Lacking its own grassroots machinery, Pejuang is now dependent on Anwar Ibrahim's PKR to connect with voters. Should his candidate lose conclusively, it may herald the end of the fledgling party and potentially of Mahathir as a political heavy-hitter.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

On August 29, the residents of Slim, a small, rural and Malay-majority state seat will vote in a by-election. While the constituency is not usually on most people's radar, this time around, strategists and analysts will be eagerly scrutinizing the results of the contest. On the one hand, voting in this constituency will be an indication of the feelings on the ground for the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysia's erstwhile dominant party. On the other, it will be the debut of Malaysia's newest party, Pejuang, the political vehicle of former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad. Beyond the fortunes of BN and Pejuang per se, the by-election will test the internal cohesion of the expanding Muafakat Nasional coalition as well as the recently-ousted Pakatan Harapan grouping.

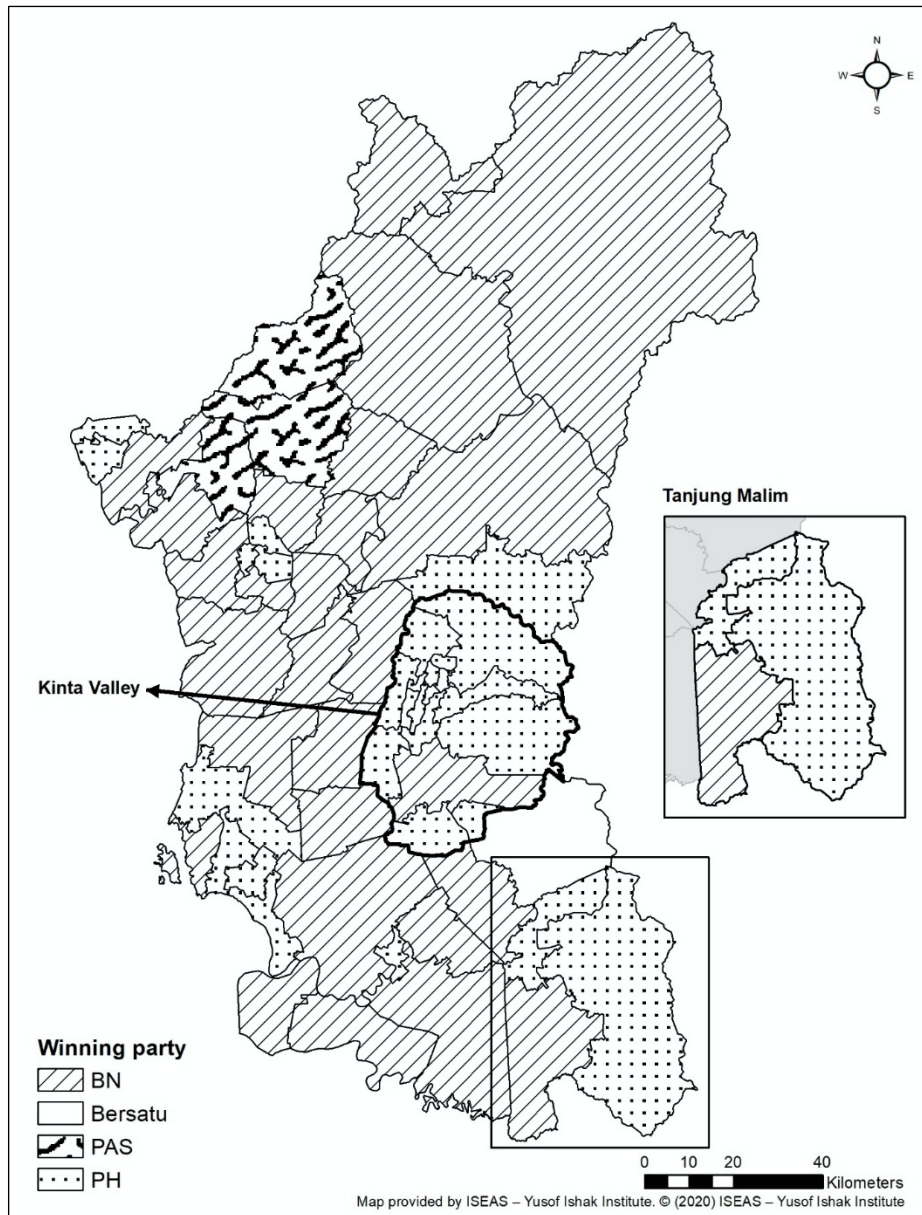
## **BACKGROUND**

Perak is one of Malaysia's largest, more diverse, and politically-important states, and home to an estimated 1.2 million registered voters and 24 parliamentary seats. Since 2008, the state has been an important electoral battleground, with the opposition securing the state government on two occasions, in 2008 and 2018.

Given its size and diversified economy, Perak has a substantial number of urban and semi-urban seats, as well as rural and agriculturally-dependent constituencies. The former have been fertile terrain for the recently-ousted Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition. In the 2018 General Elections (GE-14), the grouping secured many of these seats, geographically clustered around the Kinta Valley and other towns, including Taiping and Sitiawan (Figure One). Conversely, BN and the Islamist Party, PAS, won a significant number of semi-urban constituencies outside of the Kinta Valley, as well as most of the state's rural seats.

In GE-14, PH garnered 29 seats in the 59-seat state assembly. Of the remaining 30, BN won 27 and PAS three. As the latter two parties were not in a coalition at that point, PH was given the right to form the state government. However, following a political reconfiguration at the national level on March 1, the Pakatan Harapan state administration collapsed nine days later. Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM) switched allegiance to form a coalition, Perikatan Nasional, with BN and PAS. In addition, two assemblypersons from the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and one each from Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Amanah crossed the floor. At present, the Perikatan Nasional coalition has a majority of 34 seats in the state assembly.

Figure One: State Seats by Coalition (GE-14)



## THE CONSTITUENCY

Slim has some 23,000 registered voters, 75% of whom are Malays. Indians, Chinese, and Orang Asli voters comprise 13, 10, and 2 per cent, respectively.

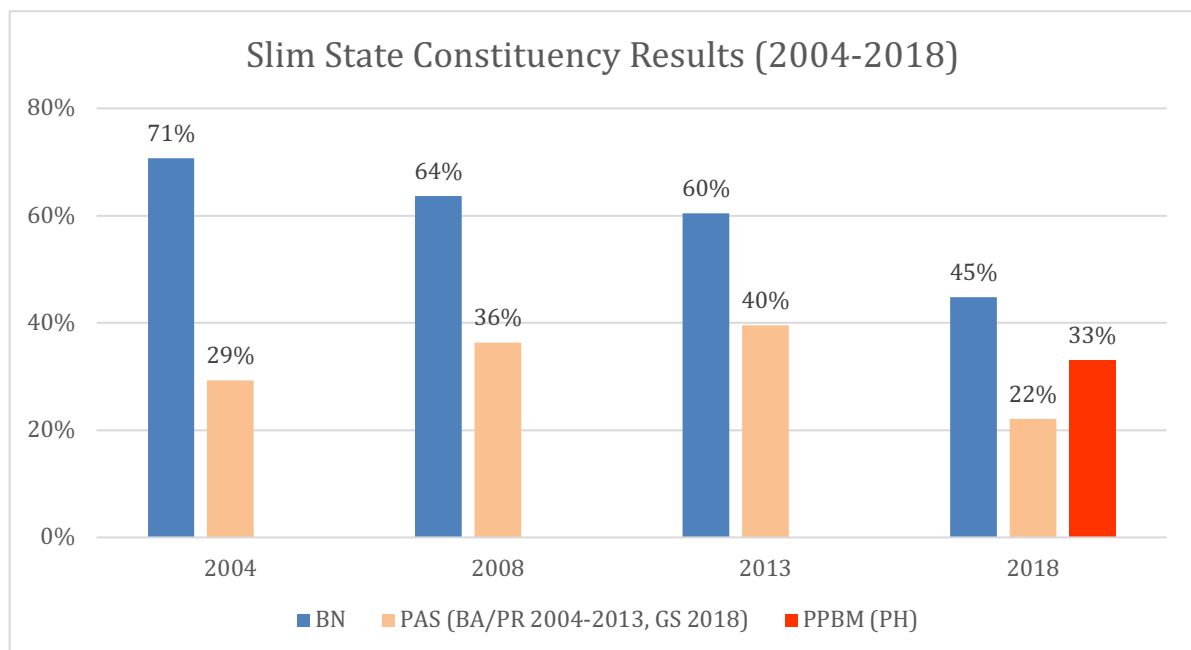
The seat contains 2 FELDA and 1 FELCRA settlements. These communities are beneficiaries of federal government agricultural development initiatives and tend to be staunch supporters of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Indeed, Slim has been held by UMNO since the constituency was established in 2004.

The by-election is being called following the demise of the state assemblyperson for Slim and Barisan Nasional Division Chief for the Tanjung Malim parliamentary seat, Mohd Khusairi Abdul Talib, on July 15<sup>th</sup>.

The constituency's economy is based on agriculture, with oil palm and other plantation activities being the source of most employment and livelihoods. Given its relatively isolated location, along with unresolved issues pertaining to land rights and titles, opportunities to develop the economy through homestay or non-traditional products have been unsuccessful.<sup>1</sup> Some modern sector employment opportunities are available in Tanjung Malim town, which lies in a neighbouring state seat. Slim is affected by out-migration, with younger people leaving to find work in urban centres. Infrastructure remains relatively undeveloped, with frequent flooding a particularly salient issue.

Despite the seat's traditional affinity for BN and UMNO, support has been on a downward trajectory since the 2004 General Election. In 2008 and 2013, votes for the ruling coalition fell and, as with the rest of the country, BN failed to obtain a majority in 2018 for the first time. One contributing factor was the three-way battle between Barisan Nasional, PAS, and PPBM that year. While PAS had traditionally run against BN in the seat, PPBM was able to capitalise on cost of living issues as well as the 1MDB controversy to secure a third of the votes in GE-14.

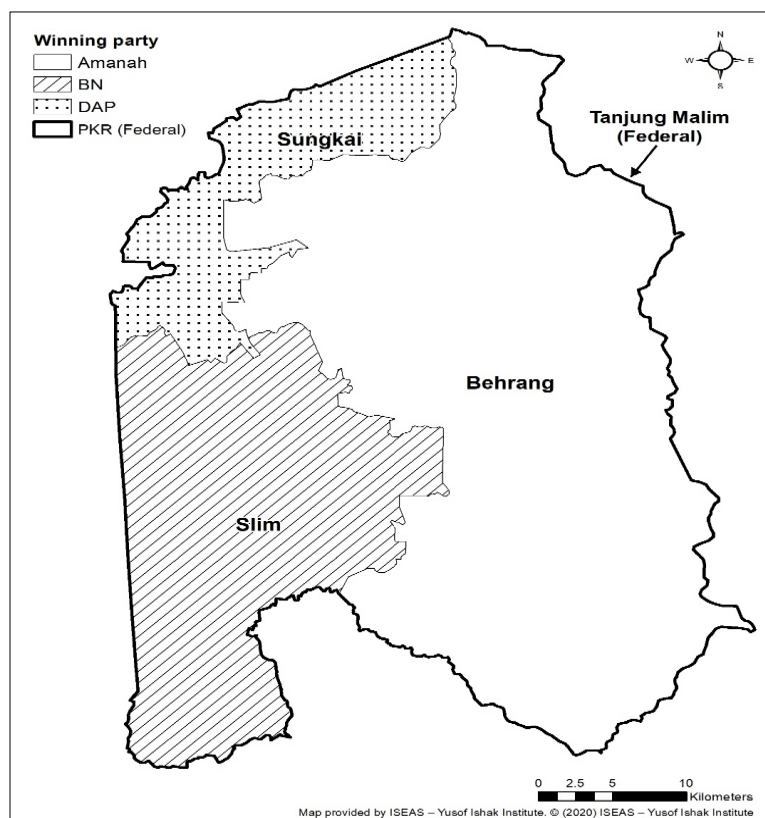
Figure Two



Note: An independent candidate contested in 2013 and garnered 200 votes.

The Slim state seat is one of three within the Tanjung Malim parliamentary constituency.<sup>2</sup> For its part, Tanjung Malim has traditionally been represented by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) which, like UMNO, is a BN component party. Despite this track record, over the past two decades, PKR has built up its grass-roots network in the constituency and, in 2018, its candidate there, Chang Lih Kang, beat the MCA candidate, Mah Hang Soon, by 5,000 votes.

Figure Three. The State Seats in Tanjung Malim Parliamentary Constituency for GE-14



### *The Candidates and Parties*

Due to the benefits of incumbency, as well as its well-developed grassroots network, BN is regarded as the favourite to win the election. That said, COVID-19 has altered campaign dynamics by increasing the importance of social media at the expense of traditional and more expensive activities such as large-scale rallies or *ceramahs*. Campaigning has consisted of door-to-door visits, as well as Facebook live broadcasts. Even election flags are less prevalent than in past by-elections, a reflection of strained financial means as well as the dampening effects of the pandemic.

BN has chosen a well-known local UMNO member, Mohd Zaidi Aziz, as its candidate. Zaidi graduated from the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) with a Bachelor's degree in Islamic Studies and served as youth chief for the Slim village UMNO branch from 2000 to 2018. He was also the BN Tanjung Malim deputy division chief up until Mohd Khusairi's passing, after which he was made acting division chief. Despite his local 'pedigree', Zaidi lives in Kuala Lumpur – making him very reliant on the party's machinery for campaigning and outreach to voters.<sup>3</sup>

Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's newly-established party, Parti Pejuang Tanah Air (Pejuang), is also contesting the by-election. However, as Pejuang remains unregistered, the party's candidate, Amir Khusyairi, will stand as an independent in the by-election. Amir comes from a prominent religious family, and is a shariah lawyer and also an IIUM graduate. Compared to Mohd Zaidi, Amir is perceived as more of an outsider, coming as he

does from the adjacent district of Telok Intan. This has been capitalised upon by BN leaders such as Najib Razak, who have stressed the importance of locally-embedded leaders.

To its credit, the fledgling party has managed to assemble some party machinery in Slim, run by Pejuang volunteers from across the peninsula.<sup>4</sup> However, the party's campaign is leaning heavily on Mahathir's personal popularity. Yet, beyond visiting the seat on nomination day, the elder statesman has not been campaigning actively on the ground.<sup>5</sup> Instead, Amir's campaign has been boosted by the presence of Pejuang MPs Maszlee Malik and Mukhriz Mahathir.

The third candidate is Santharasekaran Subramaniam, a teacher who recently resigned to stand as an independent in the elections. The only non-Malay contestant in the election, Subramaniam has focussed on the plight of Indians and plantation workers in the constituency.

## **COALITION POLITICS**

Given its ethnic composition, agriculture-based economy, and voting history, Slim is a good bellwether for voting trends in Peninsular Malaysia's Malay heartland. In addition, the campaign constitutes a unique test for the various political groupings, most notably the UMNO-PAS led Muafakat Nasional and the recently-ousted Pakatan Harapan.

With regard to Muafakat Nasional, the Slim by-election will provide crucial insights on whether PAS supporters in rural constituencies will heed their leaders' call to support an UMNO candidate. In GE-14, PAS made significant inroads in Slim among the younger electorate in FELDA and FELCRA settlements, and support for the Islamic party among under-40s is equal to, if not slightly higher than, for UMNO.

The Slim by-election also serves as a practical test of whether PAS and UMNO grassroots networks can collaborate effectively. Should the by-election indicate that PAS supporters refuse to back a UMNO candidate, or that concerted campaigning is not feasible, the simple reliance on "vote pooling" between UMNO and PAS in the next election may need to be revisited.

Indications from the campaign bode well for PAS, and are better than for PPBM. On the ground, the campaign is predominantly BN-led. While the Muafakat Nasional logo appears sporadically, no mention is made of Perikatan Nasional in campaign paraphernalia.

In addition, PPBM's decision to join Muafakat Nasional was given a lukewarm reception by UMNO President Zahid Hamidi, who stated that the party needs to prove its "sincerity" and "honesty" in the upcoming by-election. In UMNO social media, Mohd Zaidi is seen campaigning alongside UMNO and PAS grassroots without the presence of PPBM party members. According to UMNO grassroots members in Slim, UMNO and PAS members campaign together, while PPBM members carry out their own activities in support of Mohd Zaidi.<sup>6</sup> To its credit, PPBM has dispatched senior leaders including Mustapa Mohamed (Minister in the Prime Minister's Department) to visit voters in Tanjung Malim.





Source: Kaliffa, Facebook,  
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=296635734898249&set=a.107166550511836&type=3&theater>,  
(accessed August 23rd 2020).

The newly-expanded Muafakat Nasional may suffer internal fault lines, but Pejuang has problems of its own as well. Despite clearly targeting PH supporters and desperately needing to use PH grassroots networks to canvas for support, Pejuang is not officially a PH member.

While Amanah leaders such as Khalid Samad and Mohamad Sabu have campaigned for Pejuang, it is PKR that has the strongest grassroots presence in Tanjung Malim, including in Slim. There have been expressions of support from PKR Vice President and MP for Tanjong Malim, Chang Lih Kang, as well as Tian Chua, another PKR Vice President, but grassroots members and some state leaders are reluctant to campaign for Pejuang as Mahathir has yet to reconcile with PKR president Anwar Ibrahim.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Amir Khusyairi has stated that the PH leaders campaigning in Slim have focussed on national issues, rather than his candidacy per se.<sup>8</sup>

## OUTLOOK

Considering historical voting preferences in Slim, BN is likely to secure a victory come polling day. However, given the stakes, a narrow victory may not be sufficient.

In GE-14, the combined vote share for PAS and UMNO in the seat was 68 per cent, with PAS garnering about 4,000 votes or 22 per cent. Should Zaidi get significantly less than two thirds of the vote, it could mean that PAS supporters are not that inclined to support UMNO, particularly in areas where the Islamic party has been active and has fielded its own candidates in the past.

In turn, PPBM needs to show that it can drum up support for Muafakat Nasional. On nomination day, Zahid stated that the winning margin for Mohd Zaidi should be 6,000 votes more than in GE-14 in order for PPBM to be considered a genuine coalition partner. This number roughly corresponds to the party's vote share in GE-14, and unrealistically assumes that all, or most, of these voters can be convinced to transfer their allegiance from Pakatan Harapan to Perikatan Nasional.

For its part, Pejuang will seek to attract the 6,000 votes that went to PPBM when that party was part of Pakatan Harapan. However, should Pejuang garner a paltry share of the vote, say, less than 3,000, then that could indicate Mahathir's appeal to rural Malays has fallen. In addition, given Pejuang's Malay focus, non-Malay PH supporters may decide to stay at home or vote for Santharasekaran Subramaniam as a sign of protest. Should that happen, this by-election could prove to be Mahathir's last battle.

<sup>1</sup> Phone interview with a PKR Tanjung Malim party member, 18 August 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Reflecting Perak's political and ethnic diversity, these seats – Behrang and Sungkai – are more urban and have had different political trajectories. Similar to Slim, Behrang witnessed a three-corner fight during GE-14 and Amanah (PH) wrested the seat from UMNO by a razor thin margin of 409 votes. Sungkai has a Chinese majority and is the most urbanised of the three constituencies. It has been a DAP (PH) seat since 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Phone interview with an UMNO Slim grassroots member, 17 August 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Phone interview with a Pejuang grassroots member who campaigned in Slim, 18 August 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Phone interview with a Pejuang grassroots member who campaigned in Slim, 18 August 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Phone interview with an UMNO Slim grassroots member, 17 August 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Phone interview with a PKR Tanjung Malim party member, 18 August 2020.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/malaysia-mahathir-pejuang-slim-by-election-amir-khusyairi-13047168> (accessed 26 August 2020).

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