Singapore | 17 November 2021

The Melaka State Election: Unwanted, Unwieldy, and Unpredictable

Francis E. Hutchinson and Kevin Zhang*

Mr Muhyiddin Yassin (Left, Bersatu) and Mr Abdul Hadi Awang (Right, PAS) pictured in an election banner for the Melaka state election. Source: https://www.facebook.com/102563918896038/photos/a.102818498870580/116291894189907/

* Francis E. Hutchinson is Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the Malaysia Studies Programme, and Kevin Zhang is Research Officer in the Malaysia Studies Programme at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. The authors would like to thank Neo Hui Yun Rebecca for the maps that are used in this article.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The upcoming Melaka state election due on November 20 will be a useful barometer of the electoral fortunes of Malaysia’s shifting alliances and overlapping coalitions, particularly on the Peninsula.

- Melaka state’s socio-economic characteristics broadly mirror the nation’s, and it has been governed by coalitions comprised of all the large parties in the past.

- Coming on the back of an unexpected state-level tussle in the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), this election was not really welcomed by Prime Minister Ismail Sabri as it lays bare the internal fissures in his national coalition.

- UMNO decided to contest separately from Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) but remained open to partnering with the more established Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). The latter party has, for strategic reasons, decided to join forces with Bersatu – even at the cost of some choice seats.

- While UMNO has a very strong presence in the state and stands to do well, the three-way dynamic could undercut its electoral performance in the Malay-majority seats it relies on. Furthermore, reflective of the country’s fluid political scenario, a varied crew of independent candidates have joined the fray – which promises to split electoral outcomes in unexpected ways.

- The election has also been complicated for Pakatan Harapan. Internally, its component parties have been divided over whether to work with the defecting state assembly members as well as the candidate for Chief Minister.

- Coming whilst Malaysia is still grappling with COVID-19, the election will be keenly watched to see how the competing coalitions reach out to voters online and the degree to which participation rates are affected by political apathy and health-related concerns.

- The results will feed into strategies for alliance-building and campaigning going forward, notably in the upcoming Sarawak state election to be held next month, and subsequently the 15th General Election.
INTRODUCTION

Rich in history but small in size, Melaka does not traditionally command much attention. This peninsular west-coast state of 930,000 people has been a Barisan Nasional heartland, which ruled it uninterruptedly until 2018. However, as with Malaysia as a whole, the state’s politics are now more unpredictable.

Melaka’s election comes at a key juncture for Malaysia. With vaccination rates up and case numbers down, the country is slowly emerging from lock-down. However, the expected economic recovery is yet to kick in, and many are still feeling the financial cost of pandemic control measures. Coming almost two years after the advent of the unwieldy coalitions led by, first, Muhyiddin Yassin and now Ismail Sabri Yaakob, it is not clear whether voters are disgruntled, disenchanted, or disengaged.

Beyond the election’s timing, Melaka’s socio-economic characteristics make it an effective bellwether for prevailing political opinion. First, the state’s GDP per capita of RM 45,893 is not far from the national average of RM 43,378, and its economy has grown roughly at par with the country’s in recent years. Second, its ethnic composition closely matches that of Malaysia, with similar proportions of Bumiputera, Chinese, and Indian residents.

Table 1. Melaka and Malaysia’s Ethnic Composition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Group</th>
<th>Melaka</th>
<th>Malaysia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bumiputera</td>
<td>69.1</td>
<td>69.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2020

Third, Melaka has been ruled by coalitions comprising Barisan Nasional, Pakatan Harapan, and Perikatan Nasional in the recent past. Consequently, voters in the state will be deciding on known parties and coalitions.

Last, the Melaka state election will be conducted under special circumstances. As of now, election-related gatherings and social activities are not allowed, with only online campaigning permitted. While this has not prevented activities featuring senior politicians taking place, a deeper question is how COVID-related measures will affect campaigning and political participation. Barisan Nasional, in particular, has a very well-developed grassroots network that underpins many traditional campaign activities, and all coalitions have ranks of cyber-warriors. Thus, the lessons learned from this campaign are sure to feed into many strategy sessions going forward.

THE FALL OF MELAKA’S GOVERNMENT

Like other southern peninsular states such as Johor, Barisan Nasional has traditionally dominated politics in Melaka. The state’s diverse population, comprised of Chinese-
majority or mixed urban seats alongside more rural and Malay-majority constituencies, is one well-suited to the former ruling coalition’s campaign strategy. BN was able to pool candidates from its constituent ethnically-based parties and match them to the prevailing ethnicity of different seats. Yet, given their coalition framework, BN candidates could also persuade voters from different ethnic groups to support their chosen candidate.

This strategy served Barisan Nasional well in Melaka, enabling it to win consistently until 2018. Indeed, despite the state’s relatively urbanized population, outward-oriented economy, and location on the peninsular west coast, Melaka remained under BN long after Penang and Selangor fell to Pakatan Rakyat in 2008. That year, BN only lost three seats to the opposition, and maintained a large majority of 23 out of 28 seats in the state assembly. This decreased to 21 seats in 2013, before the coalition was toppled in 2018 when it secured just 13 seats.

Table 2. Representatives in the Melaka State Assembly (2004-2018)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Barisan Nasional</th>
<th>Pakatan Rakyat/Harapan (excluding PAS)</th>
<th>PAS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UMNO</td>
<td>MCA/MIC/Gerakan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Undi-Info. *Campaigned as part of Pakatan Rakyat that year

A look at UMNO’s performance shows that it underpinned BN’s victories in the state. In 2004 and 2008, the grand old party accounted for 18 out of all BN’s seats, and 17 out of the coalition’s haul of 21 in 2013. In 2018, UMNO singlehandedly won BN’s total of 13 seats. Consequently, most of the incursions by the opposition in Melaka were at the expense of other BN component parties, namely the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), and Gerakan.

In 2018, motivated by the excesses of the Najib Razak administration and the imposition of GST, Melaka’s voters swung towards Pakatan Harapan. Part of the victory was due to the Democratic Action Party (DAP), which had long contested in the state and had already secured six seats in 2013. While it secured another two seats in 2018, PH’s narrow majority that year was clinched by its partners Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah) and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu), which secured additional seats in Malay-majority constituencies. In contrast, UMNO dominated in seats with a super Malay-majority, winning 11 out of a total 12 seats.
Table 3. Melaka State Seats by Ethnic Composition (2018)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Pakatan Harapan</th>
<th>Bersatu</th>
<th>UMNO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Malay Majority</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay 60-69%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay 70%+</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Undi-Info

Melaka can be broadly divided into three regions. The state’s western and eastern areas are largely rural and hold those seats traditionally dominated by Barisan Nasional. In contrast, Pakatan Harapan has done well in the urbanised centre of the state around Melaka City, with DAP having an established track record in urban seats such as Kota Laksamana and Bandar Hilir. In 2018 the opposition coalition was able to expand northwards into rural and semi-rural constituencies through securing seats such as Rembia, Gadek, Durian Tunggal, and Machap Jaya for the first time (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1. State Seats in Melaka by Coalition and Degree of Urbanization (2018)

The Pakatan Harapan administration governed the state under Chief Minister Adly Zahari from May 2018 to March 2020. Following the Sheraton Move, Melaka was one of the state governments to fall to the newly-forged Bersatu, PAS, and UMNO coalition. PH’s toppling
was orchestrated by four state assembly members crossing the floor, including two from Bersatu, one from PKR, and another from DAP.8

ENCORE

The ensuing 17-member strong Perikatan Nasional administration was led by UMNO assemblyperson Sulaiman Md Ali.9 The short-lived administration lasted until 4 October 2021, when the state assembly was dissolved upon UMNO assemblyperson Idris Haron and three others withdrawing their support for Sulaiman’s leadership (Figure 2).10

Figure 2: Shifting Allegiances in the Melaka State Assembly since 2018

This time, rather than inter-party manoeuvring, the drivers for the change lay within UMNO itself. Idris had been the Melaka Chief Minister from 2013 until 2018 when Pakatan Harapan took power. During this time, he was also the Liaison Committee Chairman for Melaka – the highest party rank at the state level.11 In the aftermath of the 2018 defeat in Melaka, and following his election as UMNO President in June, Zahid Hamidi opted to replace Idris with Ab Rauf Yusoh, division chief of the Masjid Tanah parliamentary constituency.12

The decision to replace Idris could have been due to the May 2018 defeat or his subsequent failure to be re-elected as UMNO Division Chief of the Tangga Batu parliamentary constituency.13 Nonetheless, due to his previous tenure as Chief Minister as well as his 2018
victory in his own state seat, Sungai Udang, Idris was a credible candidate for the Liaison Committee Chair.

The animosity between Idris and Ab Rauf intensified after the Sheraton Move, when Idris was bypassed for the Chief Ministership in favour of Sulaiman Md Ali, another UMNO state assembly member. Sulaiman belongs to the Masjid Tanah UMNO division of which Ab Rauf is Chief, and subsequently the latter was made Speaker of the Melaka State Assembly.¹⁴

In theory, Idris’ decision to withdraw could have allowed Pakatan Harapan to seize control of Melaka, as these four along with the PH’s 11 assembly members would have constituted a majority. However, Chief Minister Sulaiman recommended that the state assembly be dissolved, and this was approved by Governor Mohd Ali Rustam.¹⁵

WHAT NOW?

While the Melaka Governor’s decision to call an election forestalled the immediate loss of the state government, it has also highlighted the fragility of the national ruling coalition.

The first most obvious split is between UMNO and Bersatu. UMNO Party President Zahid Hamidi has consistently advocated that Malaysia’s grand old party run separately from its latest offshoot, accusing it of a litany of slights. Early on, Zahid ruled out running with Bersatu, preferring instead to rely on its track record in the state and its solid grassroots network.¹⁶

In turn, as a smaller, younger party with limited presence in Melaka, Bersatu has been eager to leverage its mother party’s grassroots strength.¹⁷ Only when it was clear that a partnership with UMNO was not forthcoming did Bersatu supremo and former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin declare that his party would run regardless.¹⁸

However, it is not clear whether this is Prime Minister Ismail Sabri’s preference. Although a mere Vice-President in UMNO, Ismail Sabri developed close relations with Bersatu leaders during Muhyiddin’s tenure and needs the smaller party’s support to maintain his majority. In addition, he does not share Zahid Hamidi’s penchant for elections, as this may well precipitate general election being called soon – potentially signalling the end of his prime ministership.

This strategic difference exposes the implications of an awkward precedent – for the first time, the Prime Minister is not UMNO Party President. Zahid, of course, has greater heft in the party but has been put on the back foot due to his ongoing legal travails.¹⁹ One indication of this is the unusual move to share the responsibility for candidate selection for the Melaka election with Sabri and Mohamad Hasan, the UMNO Deputy President.²⁰ However, perhaps in a bid to contain damage should BN’s performance be wanting, Zahid is out of the country for the duration of the election – leaving the Deputy President to marshal the troops.²¹ Former PM Najib Razak has also taken an unusually high profile in the election.²²
For its part, through choosing to ignore UMNO’s invitations, PAS has thrown an unexpected lifeline to Bersatu. It has decided this for a variety of reasons, not least better seat selection given that it would prefer to contest in Malay super-majority areas—precisely those where UMNO does best. Furthermore, keeping Bersatu alive allows PAS to prevent itself from being dominated by UMNO.23

However, the upcoming election have not been plain sailing for Pakatan Harapan either. One key issue has been the role of PH leader Anwar Ibrahim in encouraging the disgruntled assemblypersons to cross the floor back in October. Given the opposition coalition’s vociferous criticism of party-hopping, it has now been criticised for opportunism.24

Considerable energy was spent debating whether the floor-crossers should be accepted as candidates in the upcoming election. The role of Noor Effandi bin Ahmad, the Bersatu assembly person and Norhizam Hassan Baktee, formerly of DAP caused particular controversy, with senior figures in PKR advocating a more accommodative approach and others from DAP coming out strongly against them.25

In the end, one ex-UMNO member was accepted by PKR and fielded as a candidate, and the other was similarly accepted by Amanah. Beyond Idris Haron’s potential appeal, these two parties opted to take them in to gain support in Malay-majority seats. The other two assembly members were not accepted by Pakatan Harapan, largely due to objections from DAP. It would seem that this decision still rankled within Pakatan Harapan, with PKR and Amanah announcing their candidates on one occasion and DAP launching their campaign separately.26

Interestingly, PH was placed in the unusual position of having to choose between two experienced candidates for Chief Minister, namely, Amanah’s Adly Zahari or newly-minted PKR member Idris Haron. Following considerable debate, Adly was named as the PH candidate, and rather late in the day.27

THE LAY OF THE LAND AND THE CAMPAIGNS

Following the schedule set by the Electoral Commission, nomination day was November 8, early voting took place on November 16 and the election will be on November 20. In total, 112 candidates are contesting. In addition to the three coalitions fielding their candidates, there are an impressive 22 independents running. 15 of them have opted to join forces and form their own bloc.28 This lays the ground for not just three-way contests, but also four-, five- and even six-way races.
Table 4. The Number of Candidates Fielded by Coalition by Component Party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coalition</th>
<th>Component Party 1</th>
<th>Component Party 2</th>
<th>Component Party 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barisan Nasional</td>
<td>UMNO</td>
<td>MCA</td>
<td>MIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perikatan Nasional</td>
<td>Bersatu</td>
<td>PAS</td>
<td>Gerakan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakatan Harapan</td>
<td>PKR</td>
<td>Amanah</td>
<td>DAP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

UMNO has fielded 20 candidates and also teamed up with its traditional allies MCA and MIC under the BN banner. UMNO candidates are running in its traditional areas in the east and west of the state, as well as a couple of new seats such as Pengkalan Batu and Duyong. Both of these have at least 60 percent Malay voters and are areas where Gerakan and MCA used to contest. These seats will see heated competition between UMNO and DAP, with the latter seeking to retain its rare footholds in Malay-majority areas.

As for Pakatan Harapan, PKR is running in 11 seats, Amanah 9 and DAP in 8. Relative to the 2018 campaign, DAP is running in the same number of seats, and the other two parties have split the six seats that Bersatu contested between them.

In the past days, Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Harapan have released manifestos. In an implicit admission to voters that the snap poll was unwelcomed, both placed heavy emphasis on political stability. While both promised equal constituency allocations for all elected assemblypersons regardless of political affiliation, BN promised to amend the state constitution to appoint five non-elected state assemblypersons to boost the ruling coalition’s majority, and PH promised to enact anti-party hopping laws.

Apart from political stability, BN and PH both promised a slew of initiatives to spur the economy, including grants or micro-credits for small enterprises. Welfare programmes also featured prominently in the two manifestos. PH is campaigning heavily on former Chief Minister’s Adly record in improving welfare delivery during its time in power. Interestingly, perhaps to shore up its religious credentials, the BN manifesto mentioned making it mandatory for all Muslim children in primary school to receive religious education.

As for PN members, Bersatu is running in 15 seats, followed by PAS with 8 and Gerakan with 5. Despite its recent visibility, Bersatu is a relatively new quantity in the state, competing for the first time in 2018. Within the coalition, PAS has proven accommodating to Bersatu – only running in 8 seats as opposed to 2018 when it ran in 24. Consequently, it has yielded Malay-majority seats where it polled strongly such as Ayer Molek, Telok Mas, and Tanjong Bidara to Bersatu.
Perikatan Nasional released its manifesto later than the other two coalitions, relying instead on speeches by Muhyiddin Yassin to define the tenor and scope of its campaign. Given its limited presence in the state, PN has instead sought to focus on national-level issues. In his speech, Muhyiddin targeted UMNO specifically, criticizing them for corruption and seeking to attain office at the expense of ordinary citizens.33

One unknown is the degree to which voter turnout will be affected by COVID-related fears and disenchantment with Malaysia’s political elite. This may not affect all parties equally, as Barisan Nasional’s deep roots, particularly among rural communities, means it has less to fear from falling participation rates.

Given Pakatan Harapan’s strength in urban mixed seats, and BN’s domination of Malay super-majority seats, the deciding contests will be for those constituencies with moderate Malay majorities that PH secured for the first time in 2018. This includes seats such as Gadek, Bemban, Durian Tanggal and Telok Mas. In order to have a chance of forming the next government, PH would need to retain most if not all of these. Conversely, to seize power, BN would need to hold on to all its traditional seats – including some like Merlimau and Asahan which were retained by only a whisker – and retake some of those it lost in 2018. However, PAS also performed well in some of these seats in 2018, which drew support away from BN and allowed PH to squeeze through. If Perikatan Nasional can repeat this, BN may be denied an outright majority.
IMPLICATIONS

At the broadest level, the timing and form of these elections are an indication of Malaysia’s more fluid political context in the new normal. Rather than the traditional two-way battle between BN and the opposition, which was the norm from 2008 to 2018, three-way contests could be more frequent going forward. In addition, the end of BN’s dominance at the national level allows greater agency for politicians at the state level to forge different coalitions to secure and retain power.

Turning to the Melaka election specifically, if Barisan Nasional does well and is able to secure a majority on its own, this will be seen as a vindication of Zahid Hamidi’s leadership of the coalition. In turn, UMNO will be even more demanding in the months going forward, and this may also boost Zahid’s chances in the party election that are due next year.

Should Perikatan Nasional secure a few seats and, tellingly, be needed for BN to gain a majority, then the viability of Bersatu as a party and as an important component of the ruling national coalition in the coming months will be increased. Should the attacks by Muhyiddin Yassin on Zahid and Najib bite into BN’s margins significantly, this may provide ammunition to aspiring UMNO leaders that the time for a change is imminent.

Should Pakatan Harapan build on its urban heartland and manage to retain all or part of the terrain it won in 2018, the coalition will regain some of the momentum it lost in early 2020. In addition, it will secure another urbanized, peninsular state where it can build a significant track record.

In the event that neither PH nor BN wins an outright majority, this could give way to a period of prolonged negotiations and an uncertain outcome. All coalitions may need to consider unsavoury and unwelcome partnerships to secure power.

---

1. 12th Malaysia Plan, Chapter 6, p. 6-5.
4. Which broadly overlap with the Masjid Tanah and Jasin parliamentary seats in the west and east respectively.
5. The DAP secured the Kota Melaka parliamentary constituency within which these seats are located in 2008 and has held it since then.
6. Many of which are in the Alor Gajah parliamentary constituency.
8. Bersatu (Nor Effandi, Telok Mas; Rafiq Naizamohideen, Paya Rumput); PKR (Muhammad Jailani, Rembia); and DAP (Norhizam Hassan Baktee, Pengkalan Batu).
Nine of the candidates in three seats were appointed by the Party President. 

https://thestingernews.com/2021/10/10/melaka-umno-crisis-stretches-back-to-2018-says-insider/. It is important to note that while Ab Rauf had a senior party position in the state, he had not previously run for public office and was neither an MP nor state assembly member. 

Several points are worth noting here. a) Mohd Ali Rustam served as Melaka Chief Minister under Barisan Nasional from 1999 to 2013; b) A mid-term change of government without fresh election is permitted – and not uncommon in Westminster parliamentary systems. This was seen following the Sheraton Move in February 2020 and the ensuing slew of changes in state administrations. In Melaka at that point, the decision by then Pakatan Harapan Chief Minister Adly Zahari to call for a fresh election was rejected by the Governor at that time, Dr. Mohd Khalil bin Yaakob; c) Incidentally, Ab Rauf announced that the Melaka state assembly had been dissolved, even though by convention such election was rejected by the Governor at that time, Dr. Mohd Khalil bin Yaakob; c) Incidentally, Ab Rauf announced that the Melaka state assembly had been dissolved, even though by convention such announcement are made by the Chief Minister or the Governor. d) The move to hold fresh polls was criticised by Pakatan Harapan as the Governor did not consult with the other assemblymen before making the decision. 


Consequently, party leaders such as Hamzah Zainuddin have argued that the national-level coalition should be replicated at the state level. 


In an indication of the potential for internal schisms among the state’s established personalities, Barisan Nasional is fielding almost an entirely new team.


Pelan Tindakan Maju Bersama Harapan; Melaka Kestabilan Demi Kemakmuran.

Gerakan left BN after GE2018 and has allied with PN.

Note that PAS did not contest in Sungai Udang, Kesidang, Kota Laksamana, and Bandar Hilir in 2018.