

PERSPECTIVE

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Will Perikatan Nasional's Electoral Dominance in Kedah Persist in the Upcoming State Election? Azmil Tayeb

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Official Facebook Page of Perikatan Nasional Kedah. Screen capture on 25 January 2023. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/PerikatanNasionalKedah/>

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The recently concluded 15th General Election in Malaysia saw a better-than-expected performance for the Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition, which managed to win 74 seats, making it the second strongest after the Pakatan Harapan (PH) which gained 81 seats.
- PN's strong performance came at the expense of Barisan Nasional (BN), especially UMNO, particularly in areas where Malays constitute a super majority (more than 75 percent).
- The state of Kedah clearly illustrates the dominance of PN in these Malay-super majority areas, where PN swept all but one parliamentary seat. PN even performed well in areas where non-Malays comprise a sizable minority, such as Alor Setar, Kulim Bandar Baharu, and Padang Serai.
- This article argues that PN's success can be chalked up to its consistent messaging on corruption and morality, a well-run social media campaign that predominantly targeted young and first-time voters and protest votes from UMNO supporters, and made good use of the advantage of incumbency.
- Based on the results of the parliamentary election, the PN seems likely to keep up its positive momentum in the upcoming Kedah state election. It is also likely to benefit from the disillusionment of UMNO and PH supporters who are unhappy with the two parties forming an alliance after bitterly demonising each other for years.

INTRODUCTION

Looking at the electoral map as the dust from GE15 settles, we can see a teal wave (the colour of the Perikatan Nasional or PN coalition) cascading down from the northern and northeastern states of peninsular Malaysia. PN, made up of the Islamist Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), the Malay-based Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) and the Chinese-based Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan), made spectacular gains by wresting virtually all Malay-majority areas from Barisan Nasional (BN) led by the Malay party United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). PN even managed to win seats long held by Pakatan Harapan (PH) such as Alor Setar, Padang Serai, and Kulim Bandar Baharu. While PAS has always done relatively well in Kedah, the magnitude of its victory in this election is unprecedented, precipitated by a nationwide increase of 6.9 million in new voters of which 1.3 million are 18- to 20-year-old voters.

This Perspective looks at the factors that allowed PAS, and to a lesser extent Bersatu, to sweep all but one parliamentary seat in Kedah. The results from five key constituencies – Sungai Petani, Alor Setar, Padang Serai, Padang Terap and Baling – clearly illustrate PN’s sweeping success especially in constituencies where Malays comprise a super-majority (more than 75 percent). Most of the Malay voters chose PN over UMNO even in areas that had long been strongholds for UMNO such as Baling and Padang Terap. PN has turned out to be the main beneficiary of the increase in the number of voters following the lowering of the voting age. Another surprising aspect of the results is that PN also managed to perform well in areas where non-Malays constitute a sizable minority (more than 30 percent) which had historically supported PH, such as Alor Setar, Kulim Bandar Baharu and Padang Serai, so much so that PN won in the latter two areas. Based on the results from the parliamentary election, this article also briefly discusses the upcoming state election slated to be held some time in 2023.

POST-GE14: A DIVIDED POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

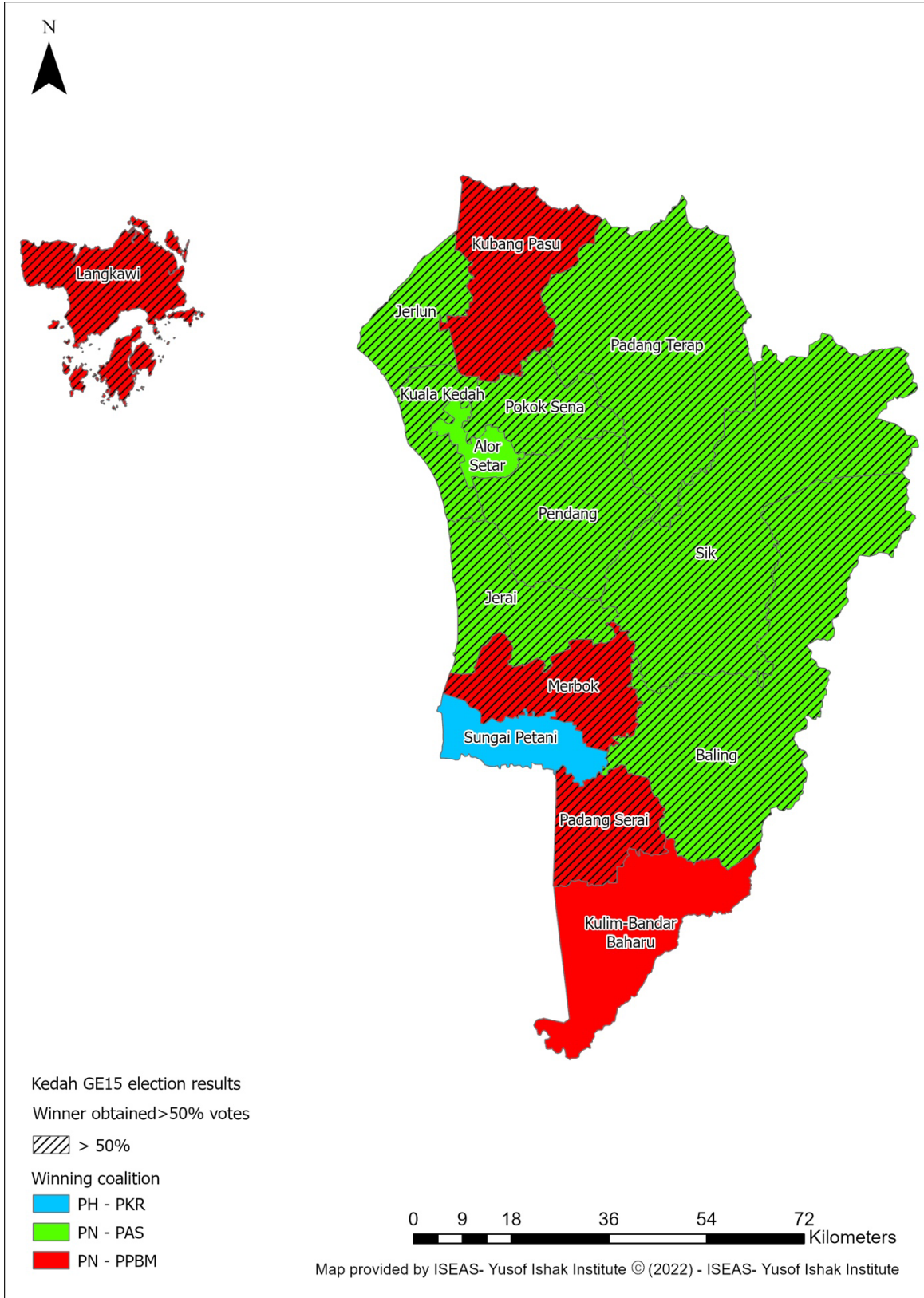
After Malaysia’s 14th General Election (GE14) in 2018, the political landscape in Kedah was decidedly mixed, a reflection of Malaysia’s multiculturalism, where Malays comprise 57 percent of the population, followed by 25 percent Chinese, 7 percent Indians, and others. In Kedah, five political parties shared 15 parliamentary seats: PKR (6), PAS (3), Bersatu (3), UMNO (2), and Amanah (1). PKR won in areas that are predominantly urban, industrialized, and have a sizable percentage of non-Malay voters. Bersatu, UMNO, PAS and Amanah competed in rural and semi-rural areas that are overwhelmingly Malay. Bersatu won its three seats – Langkawi, Jerlun and Kubang Pasu – on the strength of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad’s legacy.¹ In Malay super-majority areas, where Malays comprise more than 75 percent of registered voters, PH (Bersatu and Amanah) and PAS benefited immensely from the anti-UMNO voting trend also seen elsewhere in the peninsula. UMNO managed to hold on to its Padang Terap and Baling seats only by a razor-thin margin (see Tables 4 and 5).

Following the Sheraton Move in late February 2020 that ultimately toppled the PH federal government, several PH-led state governments also succumbed to PN, among which was Kedah.² PAS left the state's governing coalition with PH to form a new majority coalition with Bersatu, UMNO and two defectors from PKR.³ PAS's state legislator, Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor, became the state's Chief Minister, replacing Mukhriz Mahathir from Bersatu.

POST-GE15: TEALING OF THE STATE

The recently concluded GE15 saw PN win 14 of the 15 parliamentary seats in Kedah while achieving a clean sweep in Perlis (3 out of 3 seats), Kelantan (14 out of 14 seats) and Terengganu (8 out of 8 seats). PN achieved stellar results despite committing major faux pas during the two-week campaign period such as when the PAS Youth Chief in Sik, Kedah was caught on video telling those who voted for UMNO and PH were sinning and would go to hell for it,⁴ or the slip of tongue by PAS Secretary General Takiyuddin Hassan that PAS was willing to form a government with BN-UMNO after the election, which raised the ire of its PN partner, Bersatu.⁵

Map 1: Results of the GE15 in Kedah



Mapping credit: Rebecca Neo

Sungai Petani is the only parliamentary seat in Kedah that did not fall to PN. PH managed to retain that seat with a slender margin of 1,115 votes, significantly reduced from the 21,569 votes it won in 2018. PH’s candidate, Taufiq Johari, defeated Robert Ling, the PN-Bersatu candidate and the state representative of Sidam, who had jumped ship from PKR to Bersatu after the Sheraton Move. Malays comprise 61 percent of the voters in Sungai Petani, with the Chinese and Indians making up 26 percent and 12 percent respectively. Despite the additional 56,270 eligible voters, PH only managed to gain 5,048 more votes; presumably, most of the newly eligible voters chose PN-Bersatu, which, despite losing, gained a significant increase from 22,760 votes in 2018 (PAS candidate) to 49,465 votes in 2022.

Table 1: Sungai Petani parliamentary seat (<https://undi.info/>)

	2018 election	2022 election
Winner	PH (45,532 votes)	PH (50,580 votes)
Majority	21,569 votes	1,115 votes
Number of eligible voters	112,577	168,847
	Increase of 56,270 eligible voters	
Number of votes cast	92,534	130,004
Voter turnout	82 percent	77 percent

However, seats with sizable numbers of Chinese and Indian voters do not necessarily give PH an automatic advantage in this election. Take the parliamentary district of Alor Setar, for instance. Alor Setar is made up of 63 percent Malays and 32 percent Chinese. The district has always elected a Chinese MP regardless of political party. However, in this election, for the first time in its history, the seat went to a Malay candidate, Afnan Hamimi from PN-PAS, who was also the political secretary of the current Chief Minister. PH, the incumbent party in Alor Setar, saw its share of the votes reduced from 32,475 in 2018 to 27,555 in 2022 despite the injection of 25,722 newly eligible voters. Most of these newly eligible voters chose PN-PAS, which saw its share of votes go up from 17,275 in 2018 to 37,486 in 2022.

Table 2: Alor Setar parliamentary seat (<https://undi.info/>)

	2018 election	2022 election
Winner	PKR (32,475 votes)	PN-PAS (37,486 votes)
Majority	15,200 votes	9,931 votes
Number of eligible voters	80,272	105,994
	Increase of 25,722 eligible voters	
Number of votes cast	63,931	76,986
Voter turnout	80 percent	73 percent

Padang Serai is another such parliamentary district, having almost 40 percent non-Malays, with Chinese making up 18 percent and Indians 19 percent. Malays, meanwhile, comprise 62 percent of the district’s demography. Padang Serai is an interesting case due to the fact that its election was delayed by the death of one of the candidates. The election was held only after the new unity government between PH, BN, GPS (coalition of Sarawak parties) and GRS (coalition of Sabah parties) was formed. As such, its election result can be seen as either as an

affirmation of the current electoral trend in the state that overwhelmingly favours PN or as the voters' stamp of approval for the unity government made up of unlikely political bedfellows. The verdict could not have been more resounding. PN-Bersatu candidate, Azman Nasruddin, handily won the seat despite PH and BN agreeing on fielding a single candidate and campaigning together as part of the unity government coalition. Like in Sungai Petani, most of the newly eligible voters threw their support behind PN-Bersatu, increasing its share of the votes from 22,911 in 2018 to 51,637 in 2022.

Table 3: Padang Serai parliamentary seat (<https://undi.info/>)

	2018 election	2022 election
Winner	PH (31,724 votes)	PN (51,637 votes)
Majority	8,813 votes	16,260 votes
Number of eligible voters	84,834	133,867
	Increase of 49,033 eligible voters	
Number of votes cast	70,084	91,416
Voter turnout	83 percent	68 percent

UMNO, meanwhile, came into GE15 with only two incumbent parliamentary seats: Padang Terap and Baling. Padang Terap with its 92 percent Malay voters went overwhelmingly for PN-PAS. PN-PAS's candidate, Nurul Amin Hamid, brought down UMNO behemoth Mahdzir Khalid, one of the party's three vice-presidents who was the Minister of Rural Development under the previous PN federal government. Mahdzir lost by 10,959 votes, in contrast to his slim winning majority of 1,099 votes in 2018. PN-PAS, meanwhile, managed to increase its number of votes by 12,932 from 15,285 in 2018 to 28,217 in 2022. By comparison, UMNO's share of votes only went up by 874 votes despite the injection of 13,162 newly eligible voters into the electorate. It is evident that many of the new and under-30 year-old voters (about 30 percent of all eligible voters), along with many UMNO supporters, decided to support the PN-PAS candidate, and reject UMNO.

Table 4: Padang Terap parliamentary seat (<https://undi.info/>)

	2018 election	2022 election
Winner	BN (16,384 votes)	PN-PAS (28,217 votes)
Majority	1,099 votes	10,959 votes
Number of eligible voters	46,644	59,806
	Increase of 13,162 eligible voters	
Number of votes cast	38,923	48,629
Voter turnout	83 percent	81 percent

We can observe a similar dynamic in the other UMNO incumbent seat, Baling, where the Malays comprise 89 percent of the population. There, the PN-PAS candidate, Hassan Saad, defeated another UMNO bigwig, Abdul Azeez Abdul Rahim, a member of the party's supreme council. In fact, Abdul Azeez fared even worse, losing more votes than what he had gained in the previous election. In 2018, he had received 38,557 votes, while in 2022, he only won 35,356 votes despite the inclusion of 24,886 newly eligible voters. It is a testament not only to the deep

unpopularity of UMNO in Baling but also to Abdul Azeez as a personality, primarily due to his well-publicized court cases involving money laundering and corruption (of which he was recently acquitted).⁶

Table 5: Baling parliamentary seat (<https://undi.info/>)

	2018 election	2022 election
Winner	BN (38,557 votes)	PN-PAS (64,493 votes)
Majority	1,074 votes	29,137 votes
Number of eligible voters	107,213	132,099
	Increase of 24,886 eligible voters	
Number of votes cast	90,512	109,064
Voter turnout	84 percent	83 percent

Reasons for PN’s success

PN’s overwhelming electoral success can be chalked up to several factors. First was its consistent messaging on corruption and morality. Throughout the two-week campaigning period, PN focused almost exclusively on corruption cases concerning UMNO and PH, while situating itself as the cleanest alternative among the three main coalitions. At every *ceramah* (campaign rally) and on social media, PN and its supporters never failed to drive home the point that a vote for UMNO was a vote for Zahid Hamidi for prime minister and a vote for PH was a vote for the Chinese-dominated DAP and the morally compromised Anwar Ibrahim.⁷ This messaging resonated well in the Malay heartland, where PN gained most of its parliamentary seats.

PN also ran an effective campaign on social media, particularly on TikTok, appealing well to many young and first-time Malay voters. The short videos were not only made by PN candidates and party operatives but also by so-called influencers to promote PN’s message.⁸ Even its chairperson, Muhyiddin Yassin, made a social media video.⁹ There were popular pro-PN videos that were quirky such as one that showed a PN supporter singing a PAS song that did not match his “thoughts,” which was viewed more than 2 million times,¹⁰ and unconventional such as a video about PAS’s non-Muslim supporters in Terengganu speaking in the local dialect, which was viewed 1.4 million times.¹¹ Another striking aspect of PN’s presence on TikTok was the ubiquity of pro-PN videos made by regular people who did not look like campaign workers. These rudimentary videos typically involved a young Malay recording himself/herself speaking directly to the camera in a no-holds-barred manner about the current political situation.¹² These videos had an air of authenticity and sincerity about them that many TikTok users found attractive.

PN also benefited from “protest votes” by UMNO supporters who were disillusioned with the party’s state of affairs, namely in keeping the much maligned and politically tainted “court cluster” in power. In 2018, disgruntled UMNO supporters had voted for PH as a protest against Najib Razak and his infamous 1MDB scandal. The fact that Bersatu was then part of PH made it palatable for these UMNO followers to vote for PH. Fast forward to 2022, UMNO was still being led by an allegedly corrupt leader and this time it was Zahid Hamidi. However, the

difference in this election was that now, disaffected UMNO supporters had a genuine Malay-Islamic alternative to vote for in the form of PN. They no longer had to compromise their political beliefs to vote for PH as they did in 2018. We can readily observe this voting trend from the tables above. PN drew many of its votes away from UMNO, either from existing UMNO supporters or newly eligible voters who may otherwise have voted for UMNO had PN not been available as a more credible alternative.

Lastly, PN also had the advantage of incumbency that allowed it unfettered access to federal government coffers. Being the incumbent federal government meant that PN had the opportunity to channel development funds to the Malay heartlands. In the 12th Malaysia Plan (2021-2025), the then-PN government earmarked 395 big-ticket projects worth multi-billion ringgit for Kelantan alone, a stronghold for PAS.¹³ PN also needed the means to run a well-oiled election campaign that included maintaining its grassroots machinery, saturating public spaces with PN flags and banners, buying ads on social media platforms, sponsoring big rallies, and others.

In a recent turn of events, the Malaysia Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) has launched an investigation into alleged misappropriation of RM600 billion (SGD184 billion) by the Muhyiddin Yassin's administration during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁴

PROSPECTS FOR THE UPCOMING STATE ELECTION

Kedah, along with seven other states, did not hold a concurrent state election on the day of the general election. So what prognostication for the upcoming Kedah state election can we make based on the voting trends we have observed in the recent general election? First, it is highly likely that Malay super-majority areas held by PH-Amanah such as Kota Seputeh (92 percent Malays), Pengkalan Kundor (76 percent Malays) and Alor Mengkudu (77 percent Malays) will fall to PN. Similarly, Malay super-majority state seats held by UMNO are in danger of being wrested by PN, such as Guar Chempedak (89 percent Malays) and Sungai Tiang (86 percent Malays).

State seats with sizable minority groups will be closely contested, such as Derga (60 percent Malays and 35 percent Chinese), Gurun (59 percent Malays and 24 percent Chinese), Bukit Selambau (59 percent Malays, 19 percent Chinese and 23 percent Indians), and Kulim (62 percent Malays, 21 percent Chinese and 17 percent Indians). These state seats are at present held by PH but the recent parliamentary election reveals a critically significant shift away from it, in favour of the PN camp. Derga state seat may currently be represented by PH-DAP, but in 2018, votes for PAS and Gerakan combined reached 10,883 votes, and was only 349 votes less than the total won by the DAP candidate. This signals that PN will be highly competitive this time around in that constituency. Gurun state seat has always leaned PH in previous elections but the big question is whether the trend can be sustained since the Jerai parliamentary seat, of which Gurun is a part, was comfortably won by a PN-PAS candidate with the margin of 33,192 votes. A similar political situation is also seen in Bukit Selambau and Kulim, where their parliamentary seats – Merbok and Kulim-Bandar Baharu – were won by PN-Bersatu candidates by a healthy margin of 21,019 and 13,061 votes, respectively.

There are two state seats that are foreseeably safe for PH, namely Kota Darul Aman and Bakar Arang. Kota Darul Aman is the only state seat that has a Chinese majority, making up 60 percent of the electorate, while Malays and Indians make up 33 percent and 7 percent, respectively. Meanwhile, in Bakar Arang, the Chinese and Indians account for 39 percent and 14 percent of the electorate respectively, combining for a slight majority of 53 percent over the 47 percent who are Malays. The state representative of Bakar Arang, Simon Ooi Tze Min from PH-PKR, recently contested in the Alor Setar parliamentary seat but lost to a PN-PAS candidate (see Table 2).

Overall, the electoral prospects look bleak for PH-BN in Kedah. Even in areas where there are big ethnic minority groups, PN will still be contending as a frontrunner, considering how well it did in parliamentary districts such as Alor Setar. Even if PH and BN combine forces to avoid multi-cornered contests in these mixed areas, PN still poses a formidable challenge. The Padang Serai election, which was held after the unity government was formed, can serve as a bellwether for the prevailing mood currently observed in mixed areas. On top of the PN teal wave, there are now many disgruntled UMNO and PH supporters who are not happy with the two parties forming an alliance after bitterly demonizing each other for years. There is a likelihood that these disillusioned UMNO and PH supporters will decide to sit out the state election; this would effectively hand PN an easy victory. It is hard to see the pro-PN trend reversing anytime soon unless the present unity government performs well above expectation in the months to come.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Mahathir held the Kubang Pasu seat from 1974 until he stepped down as prime minister in 2003. In the 2018 general election, he chose to run in the island of Langkawi while his son Mukhriz contested in Jerlun.

² Azmil Tayeb, “Malaysia in 2020: Fragile Coalitional Politics and Democratic Regression”, *Asian Survey* 61, no. 1 (February 2021): 99–105.

³ M Hifzuddin Ikhsan and Noorazura Abdul Rahman, “PN Kedah bentuk kerajaan baru,” *Berita Harian*, 12 May 2020: <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2020/05/687992/pn-kedah-bentuk-kerajaan-baharu> (accessed on 10 December 2022).

⁴ Mohd Rafie Azimi, “Isu undi BN, PH masuk neraka, Ketua Pemuda PAS Sik mohon ‘berehat’,” *Utusan Malaysia*, 14 November 2022: <https://www.utusan.com.my/berita/2022/11/isu-undi-bn-ph-masuk-neraka-ketua-pemuda-pas-sik-mohon-berehat/> (accessed on 10 December 2022).

⁵ Haspaizi Zain, “PN sedia bentuk kerajaan dengan BN, kata Takiyuddin,” *Malaysiakini*, 15 November 2022: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/644164> (accessed on 10 December 2022).

⁶ Tarani Palani, “Former Tabung Haji chairman Abdul Azeez gets full acquittal in graft, money-laundering case,” *The Edge Markets*, 9 December 2022:

<https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/former-tabung-haji-chairman-abdul-azeez-gets-full-acquittal-graft-moneylaundering-case> (accessed on 10 December 2022).

⁷ Zahid Hamidi is the President of UMNO and is currently facing 47 charges of corruption and money laundering. DAP, meanwhile, has long been demonized in Malay-majority areas. Its former Secretary General, Lim Guan Eng, was investigated for corruption (undersea tunnel project and purchasing a bungalow well below market value when he was the Chief Minister of Penang). PN also claimed that Anwar Ibrahim was not morally fit to become Prime Minister because he was jailed twice on sodomy charges. The author, while following many PN’s campaign rallies in Kedah and Kelantan, another PN stronghold, observed the line of demonization quite often.

⁸ Some of these TikTok influencers include Syamil Ipang (850,800 followers):

https://www.tiktok.com/@syamil_irfnn?lang=en and Yana Sadrudin (642,100 followers):

https://www.tiktok.com/@yana_sadrudin (accessed on 10 December 2022). One each of their TikTok videos supporting PN garnered one million views and 278,800 views, respectively.

⁹ The trend then was doing a series of hand swiping motions while singing to the ditty, “Baby, aku ada type. Kalau aku like, aku like. Kalau tak, aku swipe” (Baby, I have a type. If I like, then I like. If not, I’ll swipe). The swiping motion for likes/dislikes obviously refers to the dating app Tinder.

Muhyiddin’s “swiping” video had been reposted and reproduced by other TikTok users. The one reproduced by the user account “abahkitemuhyiddin” was viewed more than 4 million times:

https://www.tiktok.com/@abahkitemuhyiddin/video/7162387599632387355?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1&lang=en (accessed on 10 December 2022).

¹⁰

https://www.tiktok.com/@im.fakhrul/video/7162932271324925211?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1&item_id=7162932271324925211&lang=en&q=perikatan%20nasional&t=1670841216344 (accessed on 10 December 2022).

¹¹

https://www.tiktok.com/@amzadhashim/video/7165780776292732186?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1&q=pertahan%20islam&t=1670842401740 (accessed on 10 December 2022).

¹²

https://www.tiktok.com/@mzestars/video/7164933721936727322?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7141430139963803138 (accessed on 10 December 2022).

¹³ Azmil Tayeb, “Explaining PAS’s Dominance in Kelantan,” *Trends in Southeast Asia*, Issue 17 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022), p. 11.

¹⁴ “Malaysia’ anti-graft agency probes alleged misuse of \$136 bln in govt funds,” Reuters, 8 December 2022: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/malaysias-anti-graft-agency-opens-probe-into-alleged-misuse-136-bln-govt-funds-2022-12-08/> (accessed on 10 December 2022).

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