

PERSPECTIVE

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Malaysia's 2023 State Elections (Part 1): Projections and Scenarios

*Ong Kian Ming**



Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim at the 'Mega Madani Tour' in Bangi on 8 July 2023 in part to launch the Pakatan Harapan – Barisan Nasional election machinery ahead of the upcoming state election in Selangor. Photo: Anwar Ibrahim/Facebook.

** Ong Kian Ming is Senior Visiting Fellow at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. He was a former Member of Parliament representing the DAP and former Deputy Minister of International Trade & Industry (MITI).*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Public expectations for the upcoming state elections in Malaysia, expected to take place in August 2023, are that Perikatan Nasional (PN) will likely win control of the Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu state legislatures while Pakatan Harapan (PH) and Barisan Nasional (BN) will likely secure the Penang, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan state legislatures.
- Using the results from the 15th General Election (GE15), it would appear that PN will win 32 out of 36 state seats in Kedah and almost all the seats in Kelantan and Terengganu. Meanwhile, PH and BN will be able to secure 32 out of 40 seats in Penang, 42 out of 56 seats in Selangor, and 33 out of 36 state seats in Negeri Sembilan.
- The number of seats won by PH, BN, and PN, are calculated using 3 scenarios of “low”, “neutral”, and “high” vote “transfers” between PH and BN. Even under the “low” scenario of a relatively low vote transfer rate of 30% from BN to PH, the combined electoral strength of PH and BN is sufficient to retain Penang, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan relatively easily. At the same time, even with a relatively high vote transfer rate of 70% from BN to PH, the electoral gains for PH and BN in Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu, will remain limited, based on the GE15 election results.
- There are more marginal seats in Penang, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan for PH, BN, and PN under all three scenarios compared to Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu. The focus of the campaigns will likely be in these marginal seats, mostly in Malay majority areas in the three PH-governed states.
- The potential upside for PH-BN is higher in Penang, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan, especially if a high vote transfer between PH and BN supporters takes place.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important questions facing the ruling Unity Government (UG) in Malaysia is the extent to which supporters of Pakatan Harapan (PH) and Barisan Nasional (BN) will likely “transfer” their votes to their former political rivals in the upcoming state elections in the six states which chose not to dissolve their state assemblies in 2022 when the federal elections were held. Three of the governments in these states – Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu – are held by Perikatan Nasional (PN), while the remaining three – Penang, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan – are held by Pakatan Harapan (PH).

While the overall results of these state elections are not likely to affect the stability of the federal government, the performance of PH and BN will still be important both politically and economically. Politically, the results will influence the thinking within UMNO of the strategic advantages of working with PH in future elections. It will also affect the overall confidence of UMNO leaders and grassroots members in the UMNO president and Deputy Prime Minister, Zahid Hamidi. For PH, the important question of whether it can increase its share of Malay support by working with a Zahid-led UMNO will be answered in these state elections. From an economic perspective, a positive result for the UG will give it more space to introduce more substantive economic reforms post-elections, including the rationalisation of various general subsidies towards more targeted programmes.

This article is divided into two parts, which are to be published separately. Part One uses the results of the 15th General Election (GE15) held in 2022 to project the possible outcomes in the upcoming state elections, through the use of various scenarios. These projections can then be compared against different electoral baselines to show what would constitute successful results for PH, BN, and PN.

Part Two (to be published soon) focuses on the likely campaign issues and strategies used by the three major coalitions. The fact that this will be the first time that more than one state will be holding state elections at the same time will add to the unpredictability and importance of the campaign itself. Some thoughts of the implication of the results on political developments in Malaysia are presented in the conclusion.

OVERVIEW OF GE15 RESULTS IN THE SIX STATES

Based on the results of GE15, the expectation among political observers in Malaysia is that PN is likely to retain Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu while PH, together with UMNO, will retain Penang, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan.

The rationale behind this expectation can be gleaned from the electoral outcomes for GE15 in these six states (Table 1 below).

Table 1: Overview of GE15 results for and ethnic composition of the six states

State	PH%	PN%	BN%	PH Seats	PN Seats	BN Seats	Malay %	Chinese %	Indian %
Kedah	21.8%	54.3%	20.6%	1	14	0	77.7%	14.5%	6.8%
Kelantan	8.7%	62.9%	26.5%	0	14	0	95.0%	3.4%	0.5%
Terengganu	5.4%	61.8%	31.4%	0	8	0	96.7%	2.9%	0.2%
Penang	59.4%	23.7%	15.0%	10	3	0	39.4%	49.3%	10.9%
Selangor	52.4%	27.3%	17.3%	17	5	0	53.9%	31.4%	13.8%
Negeri Sembilan	44.4%	21.7%	31.9%	3	0	5	57.6%	26.4%	14.8%

Source: Election Commission, Own Analysis

PN dominated the elections in Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu in GE15 by winning 14/15, 14/14 and 8/8 seats and 54.3%, 62.9%, and 61.8% of votes, respectively.

Similarly, PH was dominant in non-Malay majority Penang, winning 59.4% of votes and 10 out of 13 parliamentary seats.

PH and BN's combined vote share of 69.3% and 76.3% in Selangor and Negeri Sembilan respectively with PH winning 17/22 parliament seats in Selangor and PH + BN winning 8/8 parliament seats in Negeri Sembilan should also result in both states being won by PH+ BN in the upcoming state elections.

METHODOLOGY FOR PROJECTING 2023 STATE ELECTION RESULTS

However, the narratives surrounding the upcoming state elections are not just solely focused on which coalition(s) will win control of which state assemblies. In this study, attention will also be paid to the number of seats and percentage of votes won by each coalition. The detailed results will in turn provide fodder for the political class to discuss the advantages of PH and BN working together to “pool” the votes of their supporters on the one hand, and the possible further momentum gain by the PN among the Malay voters on the other.

Projecting the results of the upcoming state elections using the GE15 results as the baseline and then assuming different scenarios with regards to the extent of vote “pooling” between PH and BN will provide possible floors and ceilings of electoral benefits stemming from PH and BN working together.

Calculating the outcomes at the state seat level based on the GE15 results at the parliamentary seat level is quite straightforward. The detailed polling stream or “saluran” results tabulated in each of the classrooms where voters cast their vote is available from the Election Commission (EC).¹ These results for GE15 were obtained for all the parliament seats, except where election petitions have been filed to contest the results leading to the EC withholding the data pending the outcome of these petitions. GE15 results are therefore available for all 15 parliament seats

in Kedah, 13 out of 14 parliament seats in Kelantan,² 5 out of 8 parliament seats in Terengganu,³ all 13 parliament seats in Penang, all 22 parliament seats in Selangor and all 8 parliament seats in Negeri Sembilan. The results for the polling streams under the state seats in each of the six states are calculated and the party which won the largest number of votes identified.⁴ The results are tabulated in Table 2 below.

Table 2: State seats won by PH, PN, and BN in the six states using GE15 results

State	PH	PN	BN	Total
Kedah	4 (2)	32 (5)	0	36
Kelantan	0	42 (1)	0	42 ⁵
Terengganu	0	19	1 ⁶	20 ⁷
Penang	31 (5)	8 (6)	1 (1)	40
Selangor	40 (18)	14 (9)	2 (2)	56
Negeri Sembilan	17 (5)	3 (3)	16 (12)	36

Notes: The numbers in parentheses (X) are the number of seats which were won with less than 50% of the popular vote.

Source: Election Commission, Own Analysis

The results shown in Table 2 above confirms the figures in Table 1. PN should score resounding victories by winning 27 out of 36 seats (or 75%) in Kedah by more than 50% of votes and winning almost all seats in Kelantan and Terengganu with more than 50% of votes. PH+BN should be able to secure a comfortable victory in Penang by winning 32 out of 40 seats including 26 with more than 50% of the vote. PH+BN is expected to emerge victorious in Selangor and Negeri Sembilan by winning 22 out of 56 seats in Selangor with more than 50% of the vote (with another 20 seats with less than 50% of the vote), and 16 out of 36 seats in Negeri Sembilan with more than 50% of the vote (with another 17 seats with less than 50% of the vote). This is probably why PN sees Selangor and to a lesser extent Negeri Sembilan as states where they can make some headway. But if the support for PH+BN shifts even a little in favour of the Unity Government, PN may end up with only a handful of seats in these two states. The nuances in each of the states are discussed below.

In Kedah, even though PH (21.8%) and BN (20.6%) of the popular vote, the concentration of the support for PH was mostly in the urban areas which allowed it to “win”⁸ the most votes in 4 state seats, 2 of which were won with less than 50% of the popular vote. BN’s support was more dispersed among the non-urban seats which meant that it did not win the largest number of votes in any of the 36 state seats in Kedah.

In Kelantan, PN won 41 seats with available data with more than 50% of the popular vote with the only exception being the N9 Kota Lama seat in the heart of the capital city, Kota Bahru, which has almost 1/3 of its voters being non-Malay. It is also likely that the BN would have won the largest number of votes in at least one out of the three state seats in P32 Gua Musang which was won by PAS at the parliamentary level in GE15 with a razor thin margin of 163 votes.

In Terengganu, PN won 19 of the 20 seats with available data with more than 50% of the popular vote. The remaining seat, N21 Telemung, was won by the BN with 50.5% of the popular vote.⁹ It is likely that the polling stream results would have shown PN winning the other 12 state seats in P36 Kuala Terengganu, P37 Marang and P40 Kemamam, given that PN won these parliament seats with 64.8%, 66.5% and 57.5% of the popular vote respectively.

In Penang, PH won 31 out of 40 state seats (5 with less than 50% of the popular vote) while PN won 8 (with 6 with less than 50% of the popular vote), and BN taking only one state seat, with less than 50% of the popular vote.

In Selangor, PH won 40 out of 56 total seats. However, 18 of these seats or 45% of the 40 seats were won with less than 50% of the popular vote. It is probably this calculation which gives PN some confidence that it may be able to win control over the Selangor state assembly in the coming election.

In Negeri Sembilan, PH won 17 seats (5 with less than 50% of the popular vote) while BN won 16 seats (12 with less than 50%). With the PN only having won 3 state seats (all of which with less than 50% of the popular vote), the BN will have to win all of PH’s and BN’s marginal seats for it to take control of Negeri Sembilan, a highly possible achievement, especially given that UMNO managed to preserve its political strength in Negeri Sembilan in GE15 where it won 5 out of 8 parliament seats in the state.

The results in Table 2 above does not take into account what will happen if PH and BN are to avoid three-corner fights in the upcoming state elections. If PH and BN achieve a successful seat negotiation outcome and instead “pool” their resources and voters in a joint campaign, both coalitions can expect better support compared to the GE15 results, especially for candidates from UMNO. A reasonable assumption is that PH voters are much more likely to “transfer” their vote from PH to BN in seats where PH makes way for the BN candidate to face a PN candidate. A projection of between 80% to 100% of vote transferability from PH to BN is used in this article. At the same time, it is reasonable to assume that BN voters, especially those from UMNO, will be more wary of PH candidates, especially those representing the DAP. UMNO supporters may be less likely to support a PH candidate over a PN candidate compared to the likelihood of PH supporters voting for an UMNO candidate.¹⁰ A projection of between 30% and 70% of vote transferability from BN to PH is used in this article.

Table 3: Three Scenarios of Vote “Pooling” or “Transferability” between PH and BN¹¹

Scenario	Votes pooled within PH-BN		Votes lost to PN	
	PH to BN	BN to PH	PH to PN	BN to PN
1 (“Bad” outcome for PH / BN)	80%	30%	20%	70%
2 (Neutral)	90%	50%	10%	50%
3 (“Good” outcome for PH / BN)	100%	70%	0%	30%

Table 3 above uses three scenarios to project the state election results. Scenario 1 represents a “low” outcome for PH and BN with a low transfer rate of 30% from BN to PH and a relatively low transfer rate of 80% from PH to BN. Scenario 2 represents a “neutral” outcome with a transfer rate of 50% from BN to PH and a 90% transfer rate from PH to BN. Scenario 3 represents a “high” outcome for PH and BN with a 70% transfer rate from BN to PH and a 100% transfer rate from PH to BN. The vote transfer from PH to BN is used in all the state seats won by BN or where BN came second place to PN. The vote transfer from BN to PH is used in all the state seats won by PH or where PH came second place to PN.

How will the projected results in each of the states change under these three Scenarios? The results are summarized in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Projection of state election results under Scenario 1, Scenario 2 and Scenario 3 (using GE15 results as the baseline)

State	Scenario 1 “Bad” outcome for PH- BN			Scenario 2 Neutral			Scenario 3 “Good” outcome for PH/ BN		
	PH	BN	PN	PH	BN	PN	PH	BN	PN
Kedah	4 (2)	0	32 (4)	4 (1)	0	32 (5)	5 (2)	0	31 (8)
Kelantan	0	0	42 (1)	0	0	42 (1)	1 (1)	0	41 (1)
Terengganu	0	1 (1)	19 (0)	0	1 (1)	19 (0)	0	1 (1)	19 (1)
Penang	26 (0)	2 (0)	12 (9)	31 (5)	3 (1)	6 (6)	33 (4)	3 (1)	4 (4)
Selangor	37 (15)	6 (3)	13 (6)	40 (11)	7 (4)	9 (5)	43 (5)	7 (4)	6 (3)
Negeri Sembilan	15 (2)	16 (0)	5 (2)	17 (2)	16 (0)	3 (3)	20 (2)	16 (0)	0

Numbers in parentheses (X) indicate the seats which are projected to be won by the respective coalitions with less than 55% of the popular vote, which is the threshold used to define marginal seats in a contest featuring two parties.

For Kedah, the vote pooling effects has little impact on the projected outcomes calculated in Table 2. Only one extra seat is won by PH¹² under Scenario 3. This is because the PH vote transfers to BN / UMNO are not sufficient to overcome the advantage achieved by PN in GE15. The attention of PH and BN will likely be on the eight marginal PN seats under Scenario 3 during the state elections.¹³

In Kelantan, the vote polling effects also have little impact on the projected outcomes. Only under Scenario 3 is PH able to win one state seat (N9 Kota Lama) with the help of sufficient vote transfers from BN / UMNO. The number of marginal PN seats is just limited to one even under Scenario 3.¹⁴

In Terengganu, the status quo of PN dominance remains, even under Scenario 3. Only one PN state seat appears marginal under Scenario 3.¹⁵

In Penang, under Scenario 1, where more BN votes are transferred to PN than to PH, PN is able to pick up 4 additional state seats (from 8 to 12). BN, meanwhile, is able to pick up one additional state seat (from 1 to 2) while PH is the most negatively impacted, losing 5 state seats in total (from 31 to 26). Under Scenario 2, PH is able to maintain 31 state seats with BN gaining 2 (from 1 to 3) and PN losing 2 (from 8 to 6). Under Scenario 3, PH is able to gain an additional 2 seats (from 31 to 33), with BN winning 3 while PN loses 4 seats (from 8 to 4). The competition in Penang will be in the Malay majority state seats located under the P41 Kepala Batas, P42 Tasek Gelugor, P44 Permatang Pauh, P47 Nibong Tebal, and P53 Balik Pulau parliamentary seats. PH and BN are able to benefit more or less equally from a high transfer of votes under Scenario 3.

In Selangor, it is interesting to note that even under Scenario 1, with a low transfer of votes from BN to PH, PN actually loses one nett seat (from 14 to 13). This is because the relatively high transfer rate of votes from PH to BN helps the latter win an extra 4 seats (from 2 to 6). PH loses nett 3 seats. Under Scenario 3, with a relatively high transfer of votes from BN to PH, the latter is able to increase its number of seats by 2 (from 40 to 43) with BN picking up 5 extra seats (from 2 to 7) and PN losing 8 seats (from 14 to 6). In Selangor, BN is able to benefit more from PH's support in Malay majority areas where BN still maintains some baseline strength, such as the northern and more rural parts of the state (areas under the parliament seats of P92 Sabak Bernam, P93 Sungai Besar and P95 Tanjong Karang). These projections show that unless PN is able to manufacture a significant swing in the Malay support away from PH and BN in the state, it faces an uphill task to capture control of the state, despite recent assertions by former UMNO state chief, Noh Omar.¹⁶

Finally, in Negeri Sembilan, under Scenario 1, PN is only able to increase its number of seats by 2 (from 3 to 5) at PH's expense (from 17 to 15). Under Scenario 3, PN faces the prospect of being left with no seat won.

CONCLUSION

To conclude Part One, unless there are big swings in favour of either PH-BN or PN among Malay voters (perhaps more likely) or non-Malay voters (much less likely), the anticipated outcome of three states remaining in the PN column (Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu) and three in the PH-BN column (Penang, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan) will be the most likely. The upside for PH-BN is higher because of the potential of higher vote transferability from PH to BN in Penang, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan and from BN to PH in the same states (but with a lower probability).

Part Two of this article (to be published soon) will discuss the likely campaign strategies and the possible political impact arising from different electoral outcomes.

ENDNOTES

¹ This data is available for purchase.

² There is an election petition contesting the results in P32 Gua Musang.

³ There are election petitions contesting the results in P36 Kuala Terengganu, P37 Marang, and P40 Kemamam.

⁴ The early and postal votes, which are calculated at the parliament seat level and not the polling stream level, are not included in the calculation of the results at the state seat level.

⁵ Not including the 3 state seats in P32 Gua Musang

⁶ N21 Telemung was won by the BN with 50.5% of the popular vote.

⁷ Not including the 4 state seats in P36 Kuala Terengganu, the 4 state seats in P37 Marang, the 4 state seats in P40 Kemamam.

⁸ The word “win” or “won” in this section means that this coalition would have emerged victorious in these state seats had the results for GE15 been replicated at the state seat level.

⁹ There could be candidate specific factors which explain this somewhat anomalous result given that PN won the parliamentary seat of P38 Hulu Terengganu with 58.9% of the popular vote.

¹⁰ In the P17 Padang Serai by-election which had to take place three weeks after GE15 because the PH candidate passed away during the campaign, only a small % of BN / UMNO votes were transferred to PH which allowed PN to win comfortably with 56% of the popular vote (compared to 32% of the popular vote won by PAS in GE14). This very low transfer rate (less than 10%) may not be a reasonable baseline to use since the cooperation between the BN and PH was only in its infancy and there was great hesitancy among BN / UMNO voters on the nature of the cooperation with its erstwhile political rivals. Having experienced 7 months as part of the Unity Government and with a UG convention under its belt, the transfer rate from BN / UMNO to PH should now rise. Therefore, the “floor” of 30% used in this article is a reasonable adjustment.

¹¹ The same turnout rate among supporters of PH, PN and BN for GE15 are assumed in these three scenarios. Unlike for the Melaka and Johor state elections which took place at the end of 2021 and in early 2022 respectively where a low turnout rate was advantageous to BN-UMNO, the mobilization strength of BN & PH combined (especially in Penang, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan) will be matched by PN’s mobilization strength in Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu. The nett effect of any differential in turnout rates among supporters of the different coalitions is likely to be smaller than the actual voting distribution of those who will turn out to vote, which is what these three scenarios are projecting. The transfer of votes by minor parties such as PEJUANG and WARISAN are not taken into account in these calculations.

¹² N25 Bukit Selambau under the P14 Merbok parliamentary seat.

¹³ N2 Kuah, N8 Pedu, N16 Kubang Rotan, N22 Guron, N27 Pantai Merdeka, N34 Lunas, N35 Kulim and N36 Bandar Baharu

¹⁴ N35 Kemuning

¹⁵ N4 Hulu Besut

¹⁶ ‘PN can capture Selangor by following MN’s formula – Noh Omar’, Sinar Daily, 2nd June 2023 (<https://www.sinardaily.my/article/197524/malaysia/politics/pn-can-capture-selangor-by-following-mns-formula---noh-omar>)

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