

PERSPECTIVE

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Malaysia's 2023 Elections: A Coming Clash of Coalitions in Selangor

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Perikatan Nasional supporters at the Selangor PN Election Convention 2023, Ideal Convention Center (IDCC), Shah Alam, on 25 June 2023. Source: Perikatan Nasional, Facebook.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The upcoming state elections in Malaysia represent a referendum on the first eight months of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's 'Unity Government'.
- The industrial state of Selangor will be the first real test whether the pact between Anwar's Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition and his Unity Government partner coalition Barisan Nasional (BN), can get support from voters.
- Based on the track record of the incumbent state administration and early polling numbers, Selangor is Pakatan Harapan's to lose. Nonetheless, political undercurrents in Malaysia show that Perikatan Nasional may have the momentum.
- This Perspective lays out three scenarios for how the Selangor state election could transpire. Although Pakatan Harapan is favoured to retain Selangor, there is a path to power for Perikatan Nasional that hinge on certain levels of voter turnout and vote transferability.
- Only a modest shift in Malay support can sweep Pakatan Harapan from power in Selangor. Much will depend on the campaign swinging undecided voters in a contest that will affect the configuration of Malaysian politics.

INTRODUCTION

The campaigning in Malaysia's six state elections is set to begin with the political temperature at boiling point. Both main coalitions frame the polls as a contest of national significance. For the opposition Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition, the polls will not just be an opportunity for them to strengthen their grip on the three states in which they are incumbent governments – Kedah, Terengganu and Kelantan – but it also sets the stage for them to potentially capture Selangor. This state, led by Anwar Ibrahim's Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition, is Malaysia's most economically developed and politically significant state.

For Anwar and his large 'Unity Government' coalition, these state elections are also being viewed as a national bellwether. They know that while a disastrous outing will not immediately threaten the government, it can inflict a serious blow. What could ensue is a prime minister becoming more cautious, less reformist and constantly questioning the commitment of the 19 parties that ostensibly have given him their support.

They will also be concerned that a rout in the northern and eastern states presently administered by one of PN's component parties, the Islamist Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), will signal Anwar's inability to gain significant support among Malay voters, something PH had already failed to do in the general election. Anwar had then turned to BN's biggest faction, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which still maintains a strong political base in the rural and suburban Malay-majority seats despite suffering its worst-ever general election result last year.

This formula now faces its biggest test, especially in Selangor. With urban seats encircling the national capital Kuala Lumpur to rural agricultural wards in the north, Selangor presents an ethnically diverse polity, but one with 39 of 56 seats having a majority of Malay voters. What happens in Selangor during these polls could set a voting trend that may continue until the next general election.

NATIONAL REFERENDUM PLAYED OUT IN THE STATES

PN has cast these elections as an early referendum on Anwar and the makeshift government he assembled following a hung parliament after last year's general election.

The Anwar-led government formed in the wake of the November 2023 general election cobbled together his PH coalition with a raft of coalitions and parties from Sabah and Sarawak, and, most contentiously, PH's long-time foe Barisan Nasional (BN). Although Anwar has maintained a relatively high approval rating, there is mounting dissatisfaction with the federal government's economic management for lacking direction and substance.¹ This has been exacerbated by the Malaysian Ringgit being one of the worst-performing currencies² in Southeast Asia, contributing to imported inflation and increased outflows from the stock exchange.

In addition to these economic woes, Anwar's government also finds itself constantly on the defensive dealing with Malaysia's own 'culture war'. As written previously by the author, Anwar has resisted betraying his multiracial and progressive base by playing with identity politics, in particular the '3Rs' of race, religion and royalty.³ This has seen him constantly being outflanked by PN who regularly weave identity politics into their speeches and policy platforms. Anwar's cause is not helped by his coalition partner, the Chinese-dominated

Democratic Action Party (DAP), failing to change the widely held, but rather misplaced, perception in the Malay community that it is anti-Malay and anti-Islam.

With the need for the Unity Government to rally its base and shore up Malay votes, what began as an unlikely union has now developed into, for the state polls at least, a pre-electoral pact in which PH and BN will work together, avoid putting candidates against one another and even campaign on the same manifesto and platform. This could well be a precursor to a similar arrangement between PH and BN for the general election, something UMNO president Zahid Hamidi hinted at during a Unity Government convention in May.⁴

Zahid continues to be a divisive and unpopular figure who could bring Anwar down with him if he falls.⁵ With 47 charges of criminal breach of trust, corruption and money laundering hanging over him, Zahid's status as deputy prime minister makes it easy for opponents to pillory Anwar's agenda for good governance. Despite this, the prime minister has recently doubled down on Zahid and UMNO as his preferred partner to battle PN for the Malay votes.⁶

What Anwar and Zahid are both basically hoping for is that electorally one plus one equals two. Their ideal scenario is for two things to happen. First, for voters who chose PH or BN in last year's general election to maintain that choice. Second, for there to be perfect transferability of votes between PH and BN. What that means is that since PH and BN have agreed to a pact for the state polls, they will avoid putting candidates against each other in every seat. They will then hope that where PH fields a candidate, all BN votes will be transferred to PH and vice versa. If there is perfect transferability, one PH vote plus one BN vote will result in two votes for the pact.

If there is perfect transferability, the PH-BN arrangement will be a formidable force and will ensure the PH-administered states of Penang, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan will be retained by comfortable margins.⁷

Of greatest interest and consequence will be the transferability of Malay voters. This is because Malay votes were the most contested during the general election compared to non-Malay votes which overwhelmingly went to PH. If there is no perfect transferability and there is a significant shift of BN voters to PN, there could be scenarios in which Selangor is a highly contested state.

THE CASE OF SELANGOR

The Unity Government's Assets

Malaysia's economically most developed state, along with the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur contained within it, is Selangor. It has been administered by PH since 2008.⁸ That coalition comfortably retained the state in the 2013 and 2018 state elections which were held concurrently with the general elections. Out of 56 seats in the state assembly, PH has 45 seats (Parti Keadilan Rakyat [PKR] - 19, DAP - 15 and AMANAH - 6), commanding a two-thirds majority on its own. Since the formation of the Unity Government, BN now aligns itself with PH in Selangor and has pledged the support of its five seats. PN has five seats made up of Bersatu's four and PAS' single seat. The remaining seats are held by Pejuang (3), Parti Bangsa Malaysia (2) and Warisan (1).

Selangor has been led by Amirudin Shari who became the *menteri besar* in 2018. Although Amirudin is seen as a protégé to his predecessor as Selangor *menteri besar* Azmin Ali, he has

since forged his own political trajectory. He stayed in PKR and did not follow Azmin when the latter defected during the Sheraton Move that brought down the PH government in 2020.

At 43, Amirudin is young, dynamic and enjoys strong approval ratings in Selangor. A recent survey conducted on Malay voters in Selangor (a demographic segment crucial to the outcome of the polls) showed that 71 per cent of respondents approved his performance as head of the state administration and 75 per cent said they want him named as *menteri besar* should PH emerge with the most seats after the state election.⁹ Anwar has also moved quickly to quash any speculation of another candidate for *menteri besar* by naming Amirudin as his coalition's candidate for leading the state should they prevail in the election.¹⁰

The state administration has also released a comprehensive report card of its achievements over the last five years covering a wide range of public services from healthcare to housing, transport and entrepreneurship.¹¹ Some of these initiatives began before Amirudin's tenure, but are now seen very much as PH successes regardless of the person heading the state party. This has led to a pervasive feeling among PH supporters in Selangor that the state is now a stronghold in which opposing parties have struggled to make a dent in the last three elections.

Indeed, if the results of the general election are used as a proxy for what could happen during the state election, it will once again mean a comfortable win for PH. Taking the votes cast at the parliamentary level during the general election and simply apportioning it according to the state wards will see PH winning 40, PN getting 14 and BN taking 2 seats.

Therefore, the state election is very much for PH to lose. Selangor is now seen in Malaysian political consciousness as a PH fortress where their leader enjoys strong support for his stewardship of the state. A simple extrapolation of the general election results shows PH in a pole position for the state election.

Countercurrents favouring PN

However, just as we cannot assume perfect transferability of votes between PH and BN, we must not also assume that voters will vote the same way they did during the general election. Much has transpired in Malaysian politics over the last eight months and while surveys may show a high level of support for certain parties and individuals, there are strong undercurrents that may surface over the next two weeks as the campaign heats up.¹²

First, there is the UMNO factor. The state elections will determine if UMNO, led by Zahid, is an asset or a liability for Anwar. As explained above, Anwar wants to use UMNO as a partner to win Malay votes he was unable to get during the general election. Yet, UMNO continues to be seen as a shadow of the grand old party that dominated the Malay political ground for decades. UMNO is likely to get far fewer seats to contest compared to PKR and DAP in Selangor, and presently suffers from weak leadership at the state level. Should there be significant frustration among Malay voters at UMNO's lack of reform, and should this result in vote transfers, PH-BN's margin of victory could be affected.

Second, as mentioned above, Selangor voters will not just choose their state government based on the track record of the present *menteri besar*, but also use the ballot to express their feelings on national issues and the federal government. Anwar has attempted to assuage these fears in recent days by touting high-profile investments through a virtual meeting with the entrepreneur Elon Musk of Tesla, Inc. and by announcing Chinese automaker Geely's expansion plans in Malaysia.¹³

Although Anwar's administration has continued and even enhanced pre-existing measures to cushion cost-of-living challenges such as cash transfers and price control, and even subsidised food menus, there is a sense that eight months in, economic management is adrift with Anwar struggling to juggle being both prime minister and finance minister. In order to counteract this, Anwar's government is preparing both an 'economic narrative document' which has been launched today and the tabling the Midterm Review of the 12th Malaysia Plan in October to demonstrate concrete programmes that can correct course for the Malaysian economy.

Third, coming into government after many years in opposition (apart from 22 months during the first PH government), some ministers have had difficulties managing expectations. This is the case especially with regards to positions they took when in opposition and where they now have trouble performing as a result of their populist or political compromises. Videos of former opposition leaders and now ministers promising higher minimum wages and lower petrol prices or abolishing draconian laws are still used as campaign fodder by the opposition. While some voters understand that these promises are now unrealistic, others have chosen to hold these ministers to account.

The fourth issue is how identity politics and the culture war will play out in the state election. Last week saw the arrest and arraignment of PAS's election director and incumbent Kedah *menteri besar*, Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor, under the Sedition act for allegedly insulting the Sultan of Selangor. In recent months, Sanusi has emerged as a consequential and controversial figure for PN and PAS. His plain-speaking bravado and, at times, reckless abandon in taking on Anwar politically has significantly enhanced his image and following. It is likely that the action taken against him will boost sympathy for him and support for PAS in their strongholds. What remains to be seen is how it will play out in Selangor whose monarch was the subject of the alleged insult, especially in the Malay community.

Some critics have also pointed out that action against other potentially inflammatory 3R speeches, in particular one made by DAP chairman Lim Guan Eng, raising the spectre of a green wave coming to destroy non-Muslim places of worship have yet to be taken.

Sensing the disquiet in the highly contested Malay ground, DAP has crafted a narrative to ensure a high turnout at the state polls, in particular in Selangor and Penang. Along with Guan Eng's scaremongering tactics, his father and DAP veteran Lim Kit Siang has even resorted to saying that the country is "teetering on the edge of another May 13, 1969 riot," a reference to Malaysia's most deadly communal conflict.¹⁴

Anwar has also tried to stave off the challenge PN brings to identity politics by allowing authorities to move quickly against Sanusi, therefore demonstrating his commitment to defend the Malay Rulers. He has also declared recently that Malaysia is not a secular state – at least in the *laïcité* sense – in an attempt to dismiss attacks that he is too liberal on religion. While these moves help in correcting the perception that Anwar is weak on 3R issues, the question is whether it is enough for him to win Malay support, and whether that will be at the expense of his natural support base, which tends to be more liberal on social issues.

With these broader observations and their implications in the battle for Selangor, what emerges are conflicting views rather than a consensus. Two separate surveys conducted by entities aligned to opposing sides show how difficult it is to gauge voter sentiment in Selangor. Institut Darul Ehsan, an independent think tank with links to the incumbent state government, recently released results from their survey of Malay voters in Selangor showing PH-BN commanding

46.7 per cent support compared to 27.2 per cent for PN, a result that would secure victory for PH-BN.¹⁵

Conversely, a recent paper written by, among others, a former aide of PN chairman, Muhyiddin Yassin, refers to a separate survey that suggests “no significant vote transferability” between PH and BN, a situation that could pave the way for a PN victory in Selangor.¹⁶ With such divergent analyses going into the campaign period, various different scenarios are presented below to forecast likely outcomes in Selangor.

SCENARIOS

These qualitative observations present us with a few scenarios that could unfold, including one that shows a path to power for PN in Selangor. The state assembly has 56 seats, and 29 are therefore needed for any coalition to secure a majority.

Scenario One: This is a best-case scenario for PH-BN where there is a high turnout for both Malay and non-Malay voters of 81 per cent. In this scenario, PH retains its 95 per cent vote share among non-Malays while most of their Malay supporters transfer their support to BN candidates and BN supporters do likewise and transfer most of their votes to PH candidates. PH-BN would secure 52 per cent of Malay votes, which is a realistic assumption based on what PH received during the general election. The result would be PH-BN: 55 and PN: 1 in the state assembly.

Scenario Two: This is an average outcome for PH-BN and one most likely to happen if the campaign momentum turns for PN. The assumption for this scenario is that non-Malay turnout will be 55 per cent, similar to their overall turnout for the state election in Johor over a year ago now. While these elections were held during the pandemic and may represent a low baseline, they nonetheless represent the most recent state polls independent of those conducted concurrently with the general election. PH-BN will nevertheless secure 85 per cent of these votes. Malay voter turnout is modeled at 81 per cent with PH-BN getting 37 per cent due to a significant transferability of Malay votes from BN to PN instead of PH. This scenario will still see PH-BN prevailing in 34 seats compared to PN’s 22 seats.

Scenario Three: This is PN’s path to capturing Selangor. Non-Malay turnout and vote share will be the same as the second scenario above, as will the Malay voter turnout. But in this scenario, the PH-BN vote share among the Malays further drops only slightly to 32 per cent. In this case, PH-BN will win 27 seats and PN will win Selangor with 29 seats. What this suggest is that only a modest shift in Malay support by five per cent compared to the previous scenario is needed to see PH-BN lose Selangor.

CONCLUSION

These scenarios have been chosen to demonstrate that while Selangor appears to be a state where PH-BN should emerge as winners, a PN victory is not entirely impossible. Much will, of course, depend on the campaign to see if non-Malays can be convinced to turn out in large numbers and if Malays continue to give Anwar and his coalition and their partners the overwhelming support he desires.

Should BN fail to win any seats in Selangor and only muster a handful of seats in the other states, UMNO will have to consider some serious changes to both their leadership and strategy. Having suffered their biggest electoral loss during the general election, a poor outcome during these state elections will reinforce the electorate's message that UMNO, at present, is unelectable. Yet, Zahid's consolidation of the party through a purge earlier this year and by rewarding loyalists with various appointments suggests that UMNO will likely shrug off a potentially dismal result and pretend that all is well.

Anwar, on the other hand, will be forced to think long and hard about his partnership with UMNO. If UMNO turns out to be a liability during these state elections, will he want to commit himself to future electoral pacts with UMNO and BN? Or will he treat UMNO and BN as a temporary partner to ensure the longevity of his 'Unity Government' until the end of this parliamentary term and then decide on alternative potential configurations that will not include UMNO and BN? Much rides on what happens in the next two weeks.

ENDNOTES

¹ <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/malaysia-anwar-economy-rebound-slowdown-struggle-political-stability-3547616>

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³ <https://fulcrum.sg/is-malaysias-green-wave-more-a-tsunami-of-discontent/>

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⁵ <https://fulcrum.sg/umnos-zahid-a-formidable-yet-flawed-political-operator/>

⁶ <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2023/07/17/anwar-defends-principled-zahid-calls-dap-part-of-our-family/>

⁷ ISEAS Senior Visiting Fellow Dr Ong Kian Ming has explored this and provides some interesting projections <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2023-52-malaysias-2023-state-elections-part-1-projections-and-scenarios-by-ong-kian-ming/>

⁸ It was won by PH's precursor Pakatan Rakyat, comprised of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), the DAP, and the Islamist party PAS (Parti Islam seMalaysia).

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¹³ [https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/malaysia-pm-says-chinas-geely-invest-10-bln-domestic-auto-hub-report-2023-07-18/;](https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/malaysia-pm-says-chinas-geely-invest-10-bln-domestic-auto-hub-report-2023-07-18/)

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¹⁴ [https://blog.limkitsiang.com/2023/07/19/will-all-political-parties-and-candidates-in-the-forthcoming-six-state-polls-on-august-12-declare-that-they-do-not-want-a-recurrence-of-may-13-1969-riots-in-malaysia-and-reaffirm-the-relevance-of-the/.](https://blog.limkitsiang.com/2023/07/19/will-all-political-parties-and-candidates-in-the-forthcoming-six-state-polls-on-august-12-declare-that-they-do-not-want-a-recurrence-of-may-13-1969-riots-in-malaysia-and-reaffirm-the-relevance-of-the/)

¹⁵ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/672600>

¹⁶ <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2023-50-why-perikatan-nasional-may-win-in-selangor-by-marzuki-mohamad-and-khairul-syakirin-zulkifli/>

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