

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 8 August 2023

Malaysia's 2023 State Elections (Part 2): Campaign Strategies and Future Implications

*Ong Kian Ming**



Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim meeting with Taman Medan supporters in Selangor on 6 August 2023. Picture: Facebook of Anwar Ibrahim.

** 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). He is the current Program Director, Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE), at Taylor's University, a private university in Malaysia.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The allocation of seats between PH and BN and within PN was conducted successfully in terms of avoiding multi-cornered fights among the component parties of the 3 major coalitions. But the specific distribution of seats and candidates in each of the six states advantages BN-PH and PN in some areas and leaves their respective candidates more vulnerable in other areas.
- The contours of the campaign are shaping out to be relatively low key and attracting low voter interest, at least if judged from the attendance at the public ‘ceramahs’. Strategic campaigning in some of the “hot” or marginal seats in the last week of campaign will be more important than in previous elections. A low turnout rate will be disadvantageous for PH-BN, but not significantly enough to change the overall outcome.
- While PN still seems to have an advantage in social media space, especially on Tik Tok, PH has slowly but surely narrowed the gap.
- Three wins for PH-BN (Penang, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan) and three wins for PN (Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu) are expected. This would result in the status quo from before the elections being kept, and signal that the federal government will last the full term, till 2027. This will attract investors and calm the business community, and give more space for the Unity Government to roll out more substantive economic, fiscal, institutional reform and social protection policies.
- In the unlikely occurrence of a “Black Swan” event where PN wins Selangor and perhaps even Negeri Sembilan, the pressure on the federal government will be immense. A series of resignations by BN MPs, leading to a series of parliamentary by-elections, may have a domino effect that may lead to a change in government. The possibility for such an event is however very low.

INTRODUCTION

This is the second part¹ of my analysis of the upcoming state elections in Malaysia. Herein, I examine the following salient issues:

- (i) The strategies underlying the allocation of seats between Pakatan Harapan (PH) and Barisan Nasional (BN), and within Perikatan Nasional (PN) as well as the likely impact on the campaign as well as the results
- (ii) The contours of the campaign one week after nomination day and one week till polling day
- (iii) Looking ahead at the likely results of these state elections, and the political impact on the next general elections

SEAT ALLOCATION AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

The seat allocation process between PH and BN was always going to be more contentious in the PH-held states of Penang, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan, compared to the PN-held states of Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu. In Penang and Selangor, BN, or more specifically UMNO, will have to accept the reality that it will hold at most a handful of state seats and be a marginal player in the state administration. In Negeri Sembilan, where UMNO has more influence and seats, it may still have to play second fiddle to PH in not likely being able to claim the Menteri Besar (MB) position.

In the three PH-held states, PH would also have to give up some seats with incumbent candidates to UMNO to show its commitment to the BN-PH unity government cooperative framework at the federal level. In the three PN-held states, PH has less of a problem ceding the majority of seats to UMNO, especially since they feel that these are not winnable seats at this point in time.

(The implications of MCA and MIC “sitting out” these state elections will be discussed in the concluding section).

Table 1 below compares the seat allocation for the 2023 state elections (“Pilihanraya Negeri” or PRN 2023) with the seat allocation for GE14 among PKR, DAP, AMANAH, and UMNO.

Table 1: Seat allocations for PKR, DAP, AMANAH, and UMNO for PRN 2023 vs GE14

| State | PRN 2023 | | | | | GE14 | | | | | Change PRN 2023 vs GE14 | | | | |
|-----------------|----------|-----|-----------|-----------|-------|------|-----|-----------|-----------|-------|-------------------------|-----|-----------|-----------|-------|
| | PKR | DAP | AMANA-NAH | PH TOT-AL | UM-NO | PKR | DAP | AMANA-NAH | PH TOT-AL | UM-NO | PKR | DAP | AMANA-NAH | PH TOT-AL | UM-NO |
| Kedah | 10 | 2 | 9 | 21 | 15 | 11 | 2 | 9 | 22 | 28 | -1 | 0 | 0 | -1 | -13 |
| Kelantan | 6 | | 8 | 14 | 31 | 8 | 0 | 23 | 31 | 44 | -2 | 0 | -15 | -17 | -13 |
| Terengganu | 3 | | 2 | 5 | 27 | 11 | 0 | 11 | 22 | 31 | -8 | 0 | -9 | -17 | -4 |
| Penang | 13 | 19 | 2 | 34 | 6 | 14 | 19 | 3 | 36 | 15 | -1 | 0 | -1 | -2 | -9 |
| Selangor | 20 | 15 | 9 | 44 | 12 | 21 | 16 | 10 | 47 | 35 | -1 | -1 | -1 | -3 | -23 |
| Negeri Sembilan | 6 | 11 | 2 | 19 | 17 | 16 | 11 | 6 | 33 | 22 | -10 | 0 | -4 | -14 | -5 |
| Total | 58 | 47 | 32 | 137 | 108 | 81 | 48 | 62 | 191 | 175 | -24 | 0 | -30 | -54 | -67 |

Source: Various newspaper reports

A few points are worth noting. Firstly, UMNO has to “sacrifice” the most by decreasing the number of state seats it contested in, from 175 in GE14 to 108 in PRN 2023, a reduction of 67. This reflects the significant decrease in the bargaining power of UMNO post GE15. Secondly, AMANAH had to sacrifice the largest number of seats in PH, from 62 seats in GE14 to 32 seats in PRN 2023, mostly by giving up seats in Kelantan and Terengganu. This means that the ability of AMANAH to expand its influence in the PAS strongholds of Kelantan and Terengganu will be severely constrained moving forward. Thirdly, DAP only had to give up one state seat, from 48 in GE14 to 47 in PRN 2023. This was because of the fact that DAP won all of the 48 state seats contested in GE14 and one of the negotiating rules between PH and BN was that the incumbent parties would retain the seats it won in the previous state elections in GE14. The fact that PH and UMNO were able to come to an agreement to avoid any three-corner fights in the 2023 state elections means that the Unity Government platform remains coherent, at least on paper.

PKR gave up three state seats where it had incumbents to allow UMNO to contest. In Penang, it conceded the marginal seat of N21 Sungai Acheh to UMNO, one of the two seats it is likely to win in Penang (the other being N40 Telok Bahang). In Selangor, PKR gave up N17 Gombak Setia to allow the UMNO state chief to contest. (This decision was made easier because the incumbent in this seat, Muhammad Hilman, left PKR together with Azmin Ali, to join BERSATU, as part of the Sheraton Move in 2020). In Negeri Sembilan, PKR gave up the seat of N25 Paroi to AMANAH, which in turn gave up the seat of N9 Lenggeng for UMNO to contest. DAP gave up the N24 Dusun Tua seat in Selangor to UMNO, the only state seat which DAP had to sacrifice.

The seat allocation process was much less complicated and contentious for the Perikatan Nasional (PN) parties – BERSATU, PAS, and GERAKAN. PAS was willing to let go of many of the seats it contested in GE14 which it knew it stood little chance of winning, especially in Penang, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan. Its main priority in the seat negotiation process was to ensure that it contested in the majority of seats in its stronghold states of Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu, which it is able to secure. For BERSATU, being out of Pakatan Harapan (PH)

allowed it to contest in seats that were previously contested by PKR and AMANAH. It increased the number of contested seats in Selangor from 9 in GE14 to 32 in PRN 2023 and in Negeri Sembilan, from 2 in GE14 to 15 in PRN 2023. GERAKAN was also able to contest in seats that were previously contested by MCA in GE14 when GERAKAN was still part of Barisan Nasional (BN). GERAKAN went from 17 seats in GE14 to 37 seats in PRN 2023. (see Table 2 below)

Table 2: Allocation of state seats in PRN 2023 versus GE14 for BERSATU, PAS, and GERAKAN

| State | PRN 2023 | | | | GE14 | | | PRN 2023 vs GE14 | | |
|-----------------|----------|-----|-----|----------|---------|-----|-----|------------------|-----|-----|
| | BERSATU | PAS | GER | PN TOTAL | BERSATU | PAS | GER | BERSATU | PAS | GER |
| Kedah | 12 | 21 | 3 | 36 | 14 | 36 | 2 | -2 | -15 | 1 |
| Kelantan | 6 | 39 | | 45 | 12 | 45 | 0 | -6 | -6 | 0 |
| Terengganu | 5 | 27 | | 32 | 10 | 32 | 0 | -5 | -5 | 0 |
| Penang | 11 | 9 | 20 | 40 | 3 | 21 | 13 | 8 | -12 | 7 |
| Selangor | 32 | 17 | 7 | 56 | 9 | 46 | 2 | 23 | -29 | 5 |
| Negeri Sembilan | 15 | 14 | 7 | 36 | 2 | 27 | 0 | 13 | -13 | 7 |
| Total | 81 | 127 | 37 | 245 | 50 | 207 | 17 | 31 | -80 | 20 |

Source: Various newspaper reports

MUDA and PSM entered into an electoral alliance for the 2023 state elections with their efforts focused mostly in the state of Selangor where 14 out of 18 MUDA candidates are contesting and where the PSM’s 4 candidates are contesting (See Table 3 below).

Table 3: Allocation of seats in PRN 2023 – MUDA and PSM

| State | PRN 2023 | |
|-----------------|----------|-----|
| | MUDA | PSM |
| Kedah | 0 | 0 |
| Kelantan | 0 | 0 |
| Terengganu | 1 | 0 |
| Penang | 3 | 0 |
| Selangor | 14 | 4 |
| Negeri Sembilan | 1 | 0 |
| Total | 18 | 4 |

Source: Various newspaper reports

From a campaign perspective, there are some noteworthy points with regard to the allocation of seats within PH and also between PH and BN. For example, the N18 Hulu Kelang seat in the parliamentary constituency of Gombak was originally an AMANAH seat; PKR decided to swap its N41 Batu Tiga seat (in the parliamentary constituency of Shah Alam) with the N18

Hulu Kelang seat because it wants to field a strong PKR candidate to take on BERSATU's Azmin Ali, the former Menteri Besar of Selangor and former PKR Deputy President who left the party during the Sheraton Move. PKR is fielding the popular caretaker Menteri Besar, Amiruddin Shahri, who is defending his N16 Sungai Tua seat (also in the Gombak parliamentary constituency), and his political secretary, Juwairiya binti Zulkifli (former N10 Bukit Melawati ADUN), in the N18 Hulu Kelang seat, while UMNO is fielding its state chief, Megat Zulkarnain bin Oardin in the N17 Gombak Setia state seat (also in the Gombak parliamentary constituency). This strategy of fielding 2 PKR and 1 BN "big guns" in the three state seats in the Gombak parliamentary constituency is intended to pool the PH and BN votes to defeat Azmin Ali and his allies. If this strategy is successful, it will deal a big blow to the political ambitions of Azmin Ali not just to become the Menteri Besar of Selangor but also his aspirations to take over from Muhyiddin Yassin one day as the president of BERSATU. This bold strategy on the part of PKR and BN may very well succeed.

On the other hand, the decision to give the DAP-held N24 Dusun Tua state seat to UMNO to contest means that both state seats in the Hulu Langat parliamentary constituency (the other being N25 Semenyih) will be contested by UMNO. This means that the incentive for the PH parties to come out and support the two UMNO candidates in both state seats will be negatively impacted, even if the official narrative of solidarity among the UG parties is repeated publicly. Indeed, PH supporters may end up not coming out to vote, and this will affect the chances of UMNO winning one or both of these seats in the Hulu Langat area.

On the PN side, the decision to force PAS to give up the 63% Malay-majority state seat of N38 Bayan Lepas (located in the Balik Pulau parliamentary constituency) so that the GERAKAN President, Dominic Lau, can contest in a more "winnable" seat in Penang led to a backlash among the PAS grassroots in the area; this may end up causing the PAS grassroots in the entire state of Penang to not cooperate with GERAKAN.²

These three examples illustrate the importance of aligning seat allocation strategies with candidate and party allocation strategies so that the combined strength of the alliance – be it BN-PH or PN – can be maximized.

CAMPAIGN CONTOURS THUS FAR

In closely watched and closely contested elections such as the current state elections in Malaysia, the strategies undertaken and the issues raised in the course of the campaign can make a difference. These feed into the overall narrative of the campaign, providing material for social media especially Tik Tok, arguably the most important political outreach tool today. One of the most important strategy outcomes was already observed on the first day of the campaign. The political frontline for this election is the state of Selangor and if PN was to stand any chance of flipping this state, it had to field "big names" to generate public interest. There was speculation that Khairy Jamaluddin would be fielded as a PN candidate and perhaps named as PN's Menteri Besar candidate. The current Member of Parliament (MP) of Putrajaya and the former Education Minister, Radzi Jidin, was also touted as a possible candidate. When the slate of PN candidates was announced on 26 July, three days before nomination day, the absence of any "big names", especially in the state of Selangor, was palpable. Even though the

list of candidates for PH did not include any “exciting” names of its own either,³ the fact that many of the PH candidates are incumbents already gives them name recognition and an electoral advantage (provided they have a good service record during their term as ADUN). The inability of the PN to field “big guns” or other exciting candidates may prove to be one of its key shortcomings in the campaign.

In Penang, the DAP candidate list invited much public attention. Five former state executive councillor (EXCO) members were dropped as candidates including caretaker Deputy Chief Minister P. Ramasamy and DAP Wanita Chief, Chong Eng.⁴ This announcement led to a number of DAP Penang leaders and members resigning from the party and contesting as independents, including Satees Muniandy, former ADUN for N9 Bagan Dalam,⁵ and David Marshel, former DAP councillor, who is contesting in the N16 Perai state seat.⁶ It is unlikely that these candidates will be able to affect the election results as they are contesting in seats which are DAP strongholds.

Manifestoes have become more important as campaign issues. All the three major coalitions – PH, BN, and PN – issued manifestos as part of the GE15 campaign, albeit that the content of the manifestos was not discussed or debated substantively during the campaign.

For these state elections, the state-level manifestos have also not played a prominent part in the campaign thus far. Only in an economically advanced and politically sophisticated state like Selangor, has both sides – PH and PN – issued state manifestoes for the voters to compare and contrast. Interestingly, the PH manifesto was launched by caretaker MB Amiruddin Shahri, on 31 July⁷ while the PN manifesto was launched on 4 August by the president of PN and BERSATU, Muhyiddin Yassin,⁸ and not the putative MB candidate for PN in Selangor, Azmin Ali. In politics, perception matters, and the unsaid implication here is that Muhyiddin is much more popular, especially with the Malay voters, than the much more divisive Azmin Ali, because of the key role the latter played in instigating the Sheraton Move that led to the fall of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) federal government in 2020. In terms of substance, the PH manifesto seems much more focused on creating high income jobs and opportunities and also defending its own record in government over the past 5 years, while the PN manifesto seems to be more focused on social welfare programmes totalling up to RM2 billion. Interestingly, both MB candidates – Amiruddin and Azmin – did not offer to debate each other on how they would lead Selangor going forward. Instead, one political debate which will go on is the one between the Minister of Economy, Rafizi Ramli, and the PAS MP for Bachok, Mohd Syahir Che Sulaiman, scheduled to take place on 9 August 2023.

One of the key indicators of the level of vote transferability between BN and PH and vice versa is the level of cooperation between UMNO and the individual PH parties at the seat level. In places where such cooperative ties have been established even before the state elections, the level of vote transferability will be higher. In areas where such ties are weak, vote transferability will obviously be lower. One cannot underestimate the influence of human agency in determining the “closeness” of BN-PH cooperation on the ground. With the presence of strategic leaders at the local level on both sides, the chances for value-added cooperation increase significantly.

One area of campaign strategy which I am not currently qualified to speak at length on is the influence and use of social media. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the advantage which PN enjoyed on social media in GE15, particularly through Tik Tok, has dropped, with PH stepping up their own Tik Tok game. For example, Anwar Ibrahim's Tik Tok account has, at the time of writing, 686k followers and 3.3 million likes compared to Muhyiddin Yassin with 97.9k followers and 767k likes. PN's advantage in Tik Tok is not primarily via the accounts of its top leaders but through influencers and supporters whose presence is particularly strong in a state like Kedah where PN supporters can use words and actions of the caretaker MB, Mohd Sanusi, as an important content generator. The role which social media is playing in these and other elections in Malaysia deserves many in-depth studies and academic papers because of the diversity in data analysis and hypotheses which can be analysed and tested.

Interestingly, there have been no major hot-button issues raised and activated during the campaign thus far with the possible exception of Sanusi's possible arrest by the police garnering a lot of public attention, especially in the state of Kedah. Whether or not this leads to a landslide for PN in Kedah, which was already firmly in PN's win column prior to Sanusi being charged in Selangor, remains to be seen.

The overall mood and interest in this election seems to be relatively low, and this has led to some PH leaders calling for their supporters to come out to vote on 12 August 2023. A low turnout, especially among the non-Malay voters, will be disadvantageous to PH and to BN, especially in marginal seats in Selangor. Reports of low voter interest in these elections have caused some PH leaders, especially from the DAP to caution against complacency and to warn of a possible drop in its Chinese support in Penang,⁹ the low number of postal ballots in Subang Jaya as a warning for PH in Selangor¹⁰ and the need to use social media to get the voters out, especially the younger ones.¹¹ Interestingly, a low level of interest, especially among the younger voters, may not necessarily be negative for PH since many young Malay voters predominantly voted for PN in GE15. My assessment is that the turnout rate will be somewhere between 60% to 65% with the turnout among non-Malay voters being slightly but not significantly lower than the Malay voters.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESULTS

Other than a "black swan" event seeing PN capturing Selangor, the status quo of PN controlling Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu and PH+BN controlling Penang, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan will be the most likely outcome. A favourable outcome for PH+BN would be for it to capture a comfortable majority especially in Selangor and Negeri Sembilan and win at least 40% of the Malay support in Selangor and Negeri Sembilan and for UMNO to win at least one or two seats in each of the six states.

Such an outcome will provide the necessarily political stability for the Unity Government to push forward with a more aggressive policy agenda, especially on the economy, building on the momentum from the "Ekonomi Madani" policy speech given by Anwar Ibrahim on 27 July 2023. It will also provide some measure of stability within UMNO in the leadup to GE16 even if it does not rejuvenate the Grand Old Party of Malaysian politics.

For PKR, a good performance in Selangor will provide a boost for caretaker MB of Selangor, Amiruddin Shahri to make a bid for a higher leadership position within PKR and to challenge for the Deputy Presidency. A good performance for PH in Negeri Sembilan would also provide a pathway to greater national prominence for Aminuddin Harun, the PKR caretaker MB, assuming that PH keeps the MB position after the state elections. For the DAP, the tensions created as a result of the dropping of many incumbents in Penang, may set the stage for minor party tussles during the state party elections which are due to take place in 2023.

Amanah will continue to be “squeezed” into a role as a peripheral party as it has ceded many seats to UMNO in the states where it was supposed to take on PAS namely Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu. The recent passing of AMANAH’s Deputy President, Salahyuddin Ayub, is also a big blow to the party leadership, especially from the perspective of who will succeed the current president, Mat Sabu.

For UMNO, it seems unlikely that Zahid Hamidi will be replaced as president, even if UMNO does not perform well in the state elections. Even though the party grassroots would be unhappy with a relatively poor showing by the party and may want to instigate against Zahid, his firm control over the UMNO Supreme Council and others in the council who fear that they would be suspended like Hishamuddin Hussein or sacked like Khairy Jamaluddin means that the grassroots agitation will lead nowhere. MCA and MIC face real political irrelevance especially if their presence is not missed or felt in the ongoing state elections. Given the fluidity and complexity of the political landscape in Malaysia, these moving parts will continue to evolve even if the federal government remains stable after the state elections. Of course, if PN wins big, including unexpectedly winning the states of Selangor and Negeri Sembilan, then the pressure on the Unity Government will be immense and the political manoeuvring will gain in intensity. These are interesting times indeed for observers of Malaysian politics, perhaps a little too interesting.

ENDNOTES

¹ <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2023-52-malaysias-2023-state-elections-part-1-projections-and-scenarios-by-ong-kian-ming/>

² <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2023/08/05/analysts-see-pas-boycotting-gerakan-not-just-lau/>

³ The only exception being possibly Altimet (whose real name is Syed Ahmad Syed Abdul Rahman Alhadad), a popular rapper, who was fielded as PKR’s candidate in the N20 Lembah Jaya constituency in the Ampang parliamentary seat.

⁴ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/673171>

⁵ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/673530>

⁶ <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2023/07/935434/daps-david-quits-party-contest-independent-perai-seat>

⁷ <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2023/08/937238/state-polls-ph-bn-launch-kita-selangor-manifesto-five-key-pledges>

⁸ <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2023/08/04/perikatan-launches-selangor-election-manifesto-vowing-to-improve-state-economy/83586>

⁹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/674166>

¹⁰ <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2023/08/07/possible-low-voter-turnout-concern-for-selangor-pakatan-incumbents-seeking-re-election/83453>

¹¹ <https://www.thevibes.com/articles/news/97281/dap-must-plan-against-low-voter-turnout-future-of-country-at-stake>

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| <p><i>ISEAS Perspective</i> is published electronically by: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p> <p>Get Involved with ISEAS. Please click here: https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support/get-involved-with-iseas/</p> | <p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p> | <p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Editorial Committee: Terence Chong, Cassey Lee, Norshahril Saat, and Hoang Thi Ha</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: William Choong, Lee Poh Onn, Lee Sue-Ann, and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p> |
|--|---|---|