

PERSPECTIVE

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Political Polarisation Marked Malaysia's Recent State Elections

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Anwar Ibrahim at an election rally in Kuala Nerang in Kedah during Malaysia's recent state elections. Photo taken on 11 August 2023. Source: Anwar Ibrahim/Facebook.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The campaign narratives surrounding Malaysia's six state elections in August 2023 indicate increasing polarisation between those advocating for a secular multicultural approach and those preferring an ethnoreligious orientation.
- Development was the key theme in *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) and *Barisan Nasional* (BN)'s political narratives. In the more economically prosperous states of Penang, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan, they focused on rallying its supporters to "safeguard" its incumbency and highlighting the comparative lack of development in *Perikatan Nasional* (PN) and *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS) states of Kelantan, Terengganu, and Kedah.
- Nevertheless, PH-BN's framing of development from a secular-urban perspective had limited resonance with PN-PAS supporters whose paradigm as Muslims is that development should not be materialistic; it should also be holistic and containing spiritual elements.
- PN-PAS's political narrative of voting as *fardhu 'ain jihad* (obligatory holy struggle) appealed to an electorate wishing to vote for an Islamic party that professed to govern according to the Quran. PAS-PN leaders advocating the Islamic way of life were portrayed as heroes and warriors.
- One possible strategy to reduce the widening polarisation in the country is to re-delineate the constituencies to reflect the population's multiracial composition so that politicians will be incentivised to promote inclusivity to gain as much support from all ethnic groups as possible, especially at the federal level.

INTRODUCTION

Political narratives are stories and messages constructed by politicians and political parties to influence public opinion and gain voter support. Complex information is organised and presented in a manner that can be cognitively understood by citizens, and that presents an inspiring socio-political reality about political issues and events. In election campaigns, political groups compete to differentiate themselves through symbolic framing in order to gain an advantage over their rivals; they may also try to counter their opponents' narratives by highlighting inconsistencies or inaccuracies in them.

Thus, during Malaysia's six state elections in August 2023, *Pakatan Harapan* (PH, Alliance of Hope) and *Barisan Nasional* (BN, National Front), incumbents in three states – Selangor, Penang and Negeri Sembilan – and their rivals *Perikatan Nasional* (PN, National Alliance), incumbents in Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu, both presented competing political narratives, as expected. While these contrasting viewpoints have existed prior to the state elections, the mainstream narrative then was about “*Ketuanan Melayu*” (Malay Supremacy), with religious rhetoric being mostly confined to PAS-dominated East Coast states. However, the success of PH in the 2018 and 2022 general elections has resulted in the opposition fusing ethnic narratives with religious elements as a means to “unite” the Malay-Muslim community and regain their “lost” political power. This has gained increasing acceptance judging from the inroads made by PN-PAS in the recent general and state elections. A digital ethnographic study of the party manifestos and speeches, press releases, media reports, debates, and social media content from the campaign period indicates increasing polarisation between those who advocate for a secular multicultural approach and others who prefer an ethnoreligious direction, continuing a longstanding trend seen throughout much of Malaysia's history, and certainly during the country's 15th general election (GE15) held in November 2022.

PH-BN'S POLITICAL CAMPAIGN NARRATIVES

Development was the key theme in the manifestos presented by the PH-BN incumbents in Penang, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan. For example, Penang's 50-item manifesto focused on infrastructure, human capital, and balanced rural development, as well as housing for all.¹ Similarly, PH-BN's “Negeri Sembilan Unity Aspiration” manifesto contained 70 initiatives to accelerate economic growth and improve livelihood, among which were affordable homes for families and financial aid for those seeking to pursue higher education.² Meanwhile, the Selangor PH-BN administration launched its “Kita Selangor” manifesto, which pledged to provide 100,000 high-income jobs to youths and make the state a premier investment destination in Southeast Asia.³

PH ministers and MPs, such as Youth and Sports Minister Hannah Yeoh,⁴ spoke at campaign rallies, exhorting supporters to vote for their children and grandchildren's future, and rallying their relatives and friends to do the same to “safeguard” the three economically prosperous states from the PN onslaught and protect their government's incumbency. She reminded them that PN was already in control of four states – Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu – and that they should not trade a PKR chief minister for one from PAS. The implication was that the PH-BN administration had the ability to bring about economic growth and jobs compared to PN-PAS states which are not as prosperous and have limited development.

PH-BN also decided to demonstrate its ability to govern by showcasing Economic Affairs Minister Rafizi Ramli in a televised public debate with PAS assistant secretary-general and Bachok MP, Mohd Syahir Sulaiman from Kelantan. Rafizi, who spoke on the “New Model of Malaysia’s Economy”, discussed the three structural issues that Malaysia is facing, one of which was the reliance on oil and plantation industries, and low wages which exacerbates cost of living issues and slows economic growth.⁵ According to Rafizi, recent efforts by the unity government had resulted in lower monthly inflation rates since the first month of the PH-BN government, and Malaysians would enjoy higher salaries next year when the government allocates more spending in the budget.

Meanwhile, in Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah where PH-BN are the opposition, their counter-narrative highlighted the issue of development, or lack thereof, in these PN-administered states. For example, the Natural Resources, Environment and Climate Change Minister, Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, said that water quality issues were prevalent in PN-led states⁶ such as Kelantan and Kedah, unlike in Selangor which is under PH.⁷ It also poured cold water on the suggestion by Kelantan’s then-deputy chief minister Mohd Amar Nik Abdullah that villagers in the state were resourceful and knew how to dig wells or build tube wells⁸ to obtain underground water.

Another narrative in PH-BN’s campaign was the protection of fundamental liberties such as freedom of attire. This arose after two incidents that occurred recently, one where a non-Muslim lady in Kelantan was issued a compound notice for wearing shorts⁹ which was considered indecent under the state’s by-laws, and a second where a *Perodua* car service centre displayed a sign¹⁰ to remind its customers not to wear inappropriate attire such as ripped jeans, short skirts, short pants as well as sleeveless shirts. This led to some members of the public questioning PN non-Muslim candidates¹¹ on whether they would lose their right to wear shorts in public if they voted for the coalition. These incidents were attributed to increasing conservative Islamisation in the country, and the concern that this will affect the secular way of public life, especially in more urban states. During GE15, PAS-PN managed to secure 74 seats, just 7 seats less than PH which had 81, and there was anxiety that this trend would continue in the state elections, especially in Selangor, Penang and Negeri Sembilan, which had PH-BN governments. During campaigning, PAS was painted as the bogeyman and PH supporters were called out to vote in order to protect their states against the “green wave”.¹² DAP chairman Lim Guan Eng was quoted as saying that this phenomenon may result in Penang residents being prosecuted for wearing shorts in their own shops.¹³

PN-PAS’ POLITICAL CAMPAIGN NARRATIVES

The state elections saw PN-PAS building on their strengths by campaigning on social media, using TikTok videos that were circulated on other platforms, as well as personal messaging applications such as WhatsApp. In Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu, one campaign narrative propagated by PN component *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (PAS, Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) was to call on voters living in other states or even overseas to come back to their home states to vote¹⁴ to protect their Islamic government. PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang said that when other ethnic groups challenged the political dominance of Malay Muslims in the country, then voting was a *fardhu ‘ain jihad* (an obligatory holy struggle).¹⁵ TikTok videos by PN-PAS

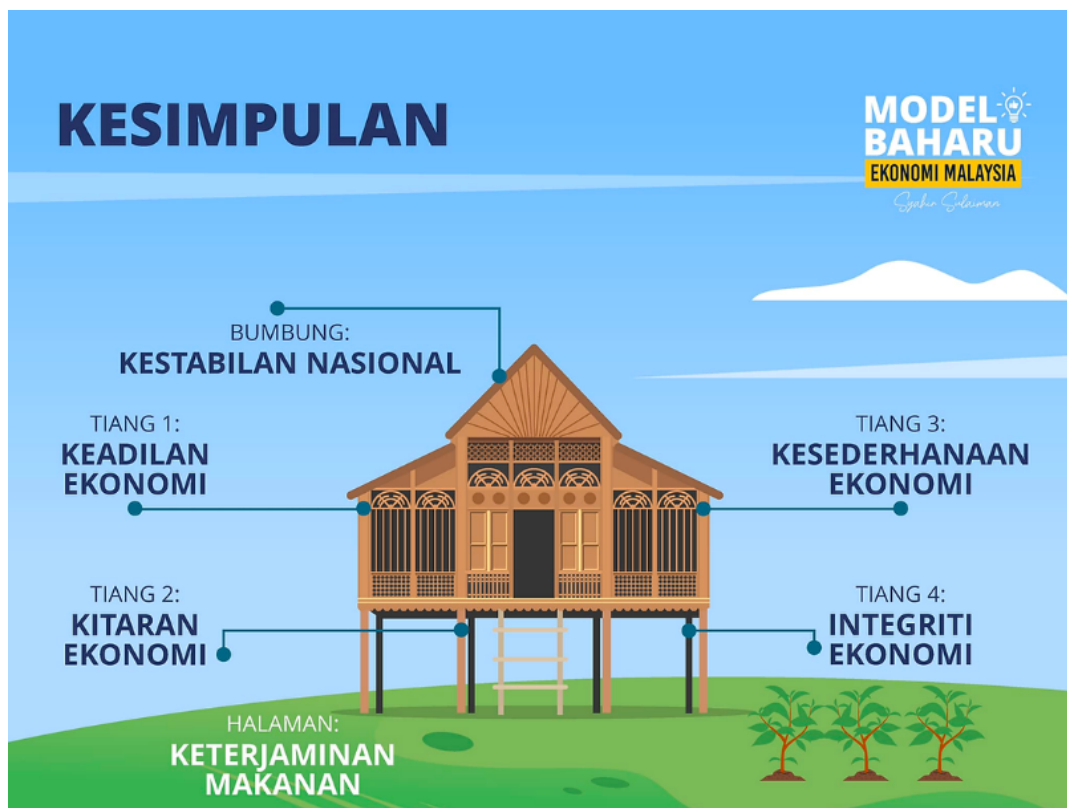
supporters presented themselves as *mujahideen*¹⁶ (Muslims who fight to defend their faith) and claimed that their participation in the state election campaign was part of their “*jihad*”¹⁷ (spiritual warfare). Such political narratives tapped on the religious inclination of its target electorate who wished to believe that they would not just be voting for a political party but for an Islamic approach to governance that upheld the Quran.¹⁸

PN-PAS leaders advocating the Islamic way of life were portrayed as heroes and warriors. For example, Kedah chief minister Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor was regarded as a *panglima*¹⁹ (commander) for shuttering gambling and lottery outlets²⁰ in the state and prioritising Islamic culture and values. Sanusi’s tendency to speak off the cuff drew comparisons to former US president Donald Trump and former Filipino president Rodrigo Duterte, but his ability to use the local dialect appealed to grassroots Malay-Muslim voters. Despite being charged with two counts of sedition for insulting the Sultan of Selangor, he was highly popular not just in Kedah but also in Kelantan and Terengganu, and many believe he gained public sympathy²¹ as the perceived victim of political persecution.²² Sanusi attacked Anwar’s privileged UMNO roots,²³ claiming that he understood the plight of the poor better since he came from a humbler background. The success of Sanusi’s election campaign was due to his fiery folksy rhetoric and to him exhorting voters to protect their Islamic government against outsiders.

PN’s manifesto for the six state elections also contained promises such as socio-economic development, job opportunities, low-cost affordable home as well as financial initiatives for women and youth entrepreneurship. For example, in Selangor, PN’s manifesto contained seven main pillars, 25 approaches and 112 offers that addressed issues such as cost of living and attracting investments into the state.²⁴ In Negeri Sembilan, PN’s manifesto proposed optimising the use of abandoned “*tanah adat* (native land) for agricultural activities to earn additional income²⁵ while in Kedah, it promised to provide affordable residential land lots for the low-income group as well as process long-pending land title applications.²⁶ The PN administration in Kedah and Kelantan also pledged to address longstanding water supply and quality.

However, analysts are of the view that political manifestos are more influential among politically literate voters in urban states such as Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Penang than among voters in rural heartland states like Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu where personal connections with the candidates as well as race and religious factors matter more.²⁷ From the latter’s perspective as Muslims, progress may not be seen only from the materialistic viewpoint;²⁸ it should be holistic and not neglect the spiritual element. The PH-BN’s framing of advancement was from the urban context that focused on externalities such as tall buildings and condominiums; PN supporters questioned whether this was really “development” *per se* where society would soon consist of self-centric individuals who did not even know their neighbours. Furthermore, people in “developed” states like Selangor end up living in flats²⁹ because land cost is so expensive compared to those in Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu who have their own landed property. There was the acknowledgement that the PN-PAS administrations of these three states had shortcomings, but these were weaknesses of the authorities and could be addressed and corrected; it was not reflective of the Islamic religion which they upheld. In fact, PN-PAS supporters stated that “developed” states like Selangor also faced water issues; in addition, they blamed the federal PH-BN unity government³⁰ for giving insufficient support to the state government to overcome the water issues.

In the debate with PH’s Economic Affairs Minister Rafizi, PAS’ assistant secretary-general and Bachok MP, Mohd Syahir Sulaiman from Kelantan outlined his New Economic Model for Malaysia, which was graphically presented through a traditional Malay wooden house. According to Syahir, national stability is likened to the roof being supported by four economic pillars³¹ of fairness, cycle, moderation and integrity. He also criticised Rafizi’s economic model for lacking direction, identity or patriotism, and that the PH government’s goal of making Malaysia³² one of the top 30 biggest economies in the world was “meaningless” if people on the ground were still encountering economic hardships.



(<https://www.pnbest.my/post/infografik-model-baharu-ekonomi-malaysia-oleh-yb-syahir-sulaiman>)

Netizens on social media, especially PH supporters, trolled this infographic and circulated memes, calling it an example of a “tebuk atap” (hole in the roof) economy in reference to the previous PN federal government that came into power during the infamous “backdoor” Sheraton Move.³³ Nevertheless, PN-PAS supporters still saw Syahir as a courageous leader for taking on a political giant such as Rafizi. In fact, Syahir himself alluded to being a *Sang Kancil*³⁴ (mouse deer) taking on an elephant, which was a strategic move to paint himself as an underdog to obtain sympathy votes. A Facebook commentator who watched the Rafizi-Syahir debate noted that while Selangor’s gross domestic product (GDP) per capita was RM59,908, its relative poverty rate was 15.3% and its Gini coefficient, which measures income distribution and inequality, was at 0.393. In comparison, although Kelantan’s GDP per capita was RM16,567, its relative poverty rate was only 9.9% and Gini coefficient was 0.379. In his view, although Selangor was more efficient in spearheading economic growth, Kelantan was better at distributing its smaller pot of wealth to its people. This post,³⁵ which was republished in

PAS' online newsletter *Harakah Daily*, had some 5,100 likes, 3,500 shares and 731 comments, showing strong engagement from netizens. Again, this shows that the framing of PH-BN's narrative on economic growth and development from a secular urban perspective had limited resonance with PN-PAS supporters who viewed things within a different paradigm.

Another political narrative that PN put forth was to continue its GE15 strategy of attacking PH-BN's credibility by focusing on the corruption charges faced by Zahid Hamidi, president of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), a main component member of BN. In fact, PAS even urged Umno voters to vote for PN because it claimed that the latter's focus on saving criminally tainted leaders meant that it had already lost its original struggle to uphold the rights and importance of the Malay community. PAS, in a press statement, said that Zahid had betrayed Umno members and supporters by supporting Anwar as prime minister and cooperating with the Democratic Action Party (DAP) in PH, which used to be its sworn political enemy.³⁶ It added that Umno was a pale shadow of itself and had no strong mandate from the people, having won only 30 seats in GE15, and that PN should be the new choice for voters seeking unity and justice; after all, its motto was *BErsih dan STabil* (Clean and Stable) i.e. *PNBest*.

In fact, a pre-election survey by Institut Masa Depan Malaysia (Institut MASA, Future Institute of Malaysia)³⁷ found that 39% of its Malay respondents who voted for BN were more likely to vote for PN in comparison to 15% switching their votes to PH. It explained that this was due to UMNO's "diminishing performance legitimacy" and its credibility falling as a result of its leaders being tainted by corruption scandals, as well as internal politics. Furthermore, its cooperation with previous arch-enemies PKR and DAP in PH to form the unity government post-GE15 did not sit well with its core supporters. Although former UMNO secretary-general Datuk Seri Ahmad Maslan had previously urged its members to follow party discipline and support the unity government in the six state elections, party loyalists on the campaign found it difficult to convince BN Malay voters to transfer their votes to PH.³⁸ Thus, PN's clarion call to Umno fence-sitters to transfer their vote to PN-PAS was more effective because these were unhappy with Umno's cooperation with PH-DAP, whose ideology they believed to be antithetical to Umno's dogma of championing Malay-Muslim rights and privileges. This helped PN-PAS to win all seats in Terengganu in the state elections and 22 out of 56 seats in Selangor, denying PH-BN the two-thirds majority it technically secured following political realignments in the wake of the November 2022 elections.

To push the campaign momentum even further, PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang suggested that a change of federal government would be possible if PN gained control of all six states in the elections. This could happen if members of parliament (MPs) from UMNO as well as Sabah and Sarawak supported PN, adding pressure on the PH-BN unity federal government, he added.³⁹ This call was echoed by PN's information chief, Azmin Ali who added that this would be "a signal of the people's voices towards Putrajaya" and their "vote of confidence in PN".⁴⁰ Legally and constitutionally, the results of the six state elections were unlikely to trigger the collapse of the PH-BN unity government at federal level, especially with the introduction of the anti-party hopping law in 2022, but from the political perspective, they were viewed as a "referendum" of voter support of Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's administration.

CONCLUSION

What is clear from the campaign narratives propagated during the six state elections is that Malaysia is becoming increasingly polarised, pitting a secular multiracial approach in governing the country against a conservative ethnoreligious ideological version of governance. PN-PAS continues to make inroads into the Malay-Muslim electorate, riding on its remarkable performance in GE15. The political middle ground is becoming smaller as both sides of the political divide become more entrenched in their positions. Anwar Ibrahim is now at the crossroads – to continue with the secular multicultural approach which ensures the continued support of its voter base or to battle PN head on and focus on winning Malay-Muslim voters, which may alienate his core support. On top of this, he also has to focus on economic growth, increasing job opportunities, and managing cost-of-living issues.

One possible card up Anwar's sleeve is to re-delineate the constituencies and address the issue of malapportionment whereby those that were previously gerrymandered to be dominated by one ethnic group, be redrawn to reflect more correctly the multiracial composition of the population, especially in the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Then, politicians would be incentivised to campaign on calls for inclusivity in order to gain support from all ethnic groups. Also, using ethnoreligious narratives to gain political support from the Malay-Muslim community at the expense of minority groups is a zero-sum game, which leaves the country more and more divided. While this strategy might work in Malay-Muslim majority states, gaining power at the federal level requires a different approach.

There is a need for more dialogue and discussions across the political divide to find common ground and to reduce the polarisation. The question is whether there is political will to build bridges, or will the divide-and-conquer strategy continue to grow in popularity and efficacy. Both coalitions are now recalibrating their strategies for the major battle in GE16, to be held in 2027. Ultimately, voters will have to decide the shape they want for the country.

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