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The Malaysian Elections: The Battle for Johor

By Francis E. Hutchinson

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The 13th General Elections in Malaysia will be a war waged at the national and local levels, for both parliamentary and state assembly seats. A number of these contests will be particularly intense, and those in Johor are arguably the most important at this juncture.
 - The state is Malaysia's second largest in population terms, and is one of the country's three centres of manufacturing. Johor also houses Iskandar Malaysia, a high-profile economic zone that is a flagship of the government's Economic Transformation Programme.
 - On the political front, it has strategic and prestige value. The Johor's large population and its electoral configuration mean it has 26 parliamentary seats - the second highest in Malaysia.
 - For the Opposition, Pakatan Rakyat, Johor represents a lever to accessing power. If the coalition can hold on to their current parliamentary seats and make significant inroads in the state, they could be in a position to lure MPs from Sabah and Sarawak to cross the floor – thus seizing Putrajaya.
 - For the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional, the state holds an inordinate amount of prestige. For the Malaysian Chinese Association, its large and well-established Chinese population entails a large member base and source of party leaders. For UMNO, Johor is symbolically vital as the party was founded there, and the state supplied a disproportionate number of the first generation of national leaders.
 - To date, only a single parliamentary seat has been in Opposition control at any one time. This may be about to change.
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INTRODUCTION

The 2008 elections reconfigured Malaysia's political landscape. The ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional and its precursor, the Alliance, in power since 1955, obtained a razor-thin majority of the popular vote (50.3%). In losing 58 parliamentary seats, Barisan Nasional also lost the psychologically important two-thirds majority that allowed it to amend the Constitution at will. Furthermore, in losing an unprecedented five state governments, a swathe of the country running from the middle of the country to the Thai border in the north fell under opposition control.¹ Of particular concern were the loss of Selangor and Penang, two of the country's economic 'motors'.

In the following months, Barisan Nasional (BN) sought to regain the initiative. The Perak state government was captured when a number of Opposition state assemblypersons crossed the floor, and an important number of by-elections were won by BN candidates. However, it was clear then, and is more so now, that the country's political context has changed irremediably.

This time round, attention is focusing on Johor, the southern-most state on the peninsula. With a population of 3.4 million, it is Malaysia's second largest – behind Selangor. After that state and the Kuala Lumpur Federal Territory, it also has the country's largest GDP. Along with Selangor and Penang, it is one of Malaysia's three centres of manufacturing, and it is also one of the country's top producers of oil palm (Department of Statistics, 2010, 2012).

Furthermore, since 2006, the federal government has sought to catalyze Johor's economic development through re-orienting a portion of the state towards complementing Singapore's economy. This area, currently called Iskandar Malaysia, has received considerable public investments in a range of projects and high-end infrastructure. Following an initial quiet period, a number of anchor projects began operation last year. In addition, work has just begun on two multi-billion dollar petrochemical projects in an area just outside Iskandar Malaysia that aim to further diversify its economy. Following the warming of ties between Singapore and Malaysia in 2010, government-linked corporations from the city-state have begun to make significant investments in the territory. And, a number of important transport initiatives are on the table to further increase connectivity between Singapore and Malaysia – passing through Johor.

However, beyond the economic importance of Johor, the stakes at play are really political. Malaysia's electoral weighting means that Johor presently has 26 par-

1 The federal government is comprised of elected members of parliament, led by a cabinet of ministers and headed by the Prime Minister, chosen by the majority party in the lower house. State governments are comprised of elected members of each state's legislative assembly, and led by a Chief Minister chosen by the majority party. With the exception of Sarawak, which operates on a different cycle, parliamentary and state elections have been held simultaneously in the past. It is possible for candidates to run for, and serve in, parliamentary and state seats at the same time.

liamentary seats, second not to Selangor, which has 22 – but Sarawak, which while having fewer people, actually has more seats (31). In addition, Johor is a relatively urbanized state (72% urban population), entailing a more informed electoral with access to a wider range of information than other Barisan Nasional strongholds such as Pahang, Perlis, and Sabah. And, relative to the Malaysian average, Johor has a large Chinese population. Representing 33.6% of the state's total, this community is the largest in proportionate terms after only Penang and the Kuala Lumpur Federal Territory (Department of Statistics, 2010).

For the Opposition, Johor has emerged as a key component of its strategy to take power at the national level. Following the failure of negotiations between Pakatan Rakyat and various locally-based political parties in Sabah and Sarawak, there will be a number of multi-cornered fights in constituencies in East Malaysia, making additional headway there problematic. That said, should the Opposition consolidate most of its gains from 2008 and prosper in Johor, it could be in a position to negotiate a 'cross-over' from the East Malaysian states.

However, the largest stakes are really for Barisan Nasional. To date, Johor has never lost more than one seat to the Opposition, consistently delivering at least 25 out of 26 parliamentary seats and 50 out of 56 state seats. Beyond the numbers, the state has unique significance to Barisan's two largest component parties, UMNO and MCA. MCA is particularly vulnerable to the structural shift in votes from the Chinese community, and faces parliamentary irrelevance if it does not do well in Johor. UMNO, for its part, was founded in the state and its Johor branch is very powerful within the party machinery. For both parties, Johor's demographics mean that it has been a breeding ground for party leaders, and losses in this state could alter internal power structures.

As a result, both Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Rakyat are sending in their 'A' team. From UMNO, Prime Minister Najib Razak and former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad have both been spending time in Johor, stumping for their colleagues running in the state. Key Barisan Nasional figures contesting there include: Muhyiddin Yassin, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education; Hishamuddin Hussein, Home Affairs Minister; as well as former UMNO Supreme Council members Shahrir Samad and Azalina Othman. Khaled Nordin, who is widely-tipped to be the next Mentri Besar, has given up his parliamentary constituency and is only running for a state assembly seat.

On the Opposition side, Lim Kit Siang, Parliamentary Leader of the Democratic Action Party has moved from his seat in Ipoh Timur, Perak, to contest in Johor. Other leading lights include: Salahuddin Ayub, a vice-president of PAS; the former head of the army, Hashim Hussein for PKR; and DAP strategist Liew Chin Tong. While the overall contest for Johor promises to be interesting, there will also be a number of riveting jousts for specific constituencies.

THE ECONOMICS OF ISKANDAR MALAYSIA

Johor is a relatively large state. Measuring some 19,000 square kilometres, it dwarfs all peninsular states except Pahang and Perak. Beyond its physical size, its land is flat and fertile, lending itself well to large-scale agricultural and manufacturing endeavours. Indeed, Johor was first 'opened up' through the cultivation of pepper and gambier in the 1840s (Trocki, 2007). However, it was really rubber plantations that enabled the state's economy to take off in the early 20th century. This has since been overtaken by oil palm, and Johor is currently the largest producer of this commodity in Peninsular Malaysia as well as a significant exporter of pineapple, coconuts, cocoa, and coffee (Ministry of Plantation Industries and Commodities, 2010).

Agriculture was a key motor of the state's economy up until the 1980s, when commodity prices fell. This prompted the state government to begin looking to its industrial sector to generate jobs and income. In the late 1980s, the appreciation of the currencies of Singapore, Taiwan, and Korea led to an influx of investment from these countries into Malaysia and particularly Johor (van Grunsven et al, 1995). In 1983, the state's primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors represented 33%, 28%, and 39% of GDP, respectively. By 2008, these figures were 8%, 44% and 48%, respectively (Johor State Economic Planning Unit, 2008).

In 2006, Khazanah, the Malaysian Government's investment arm, and the Johor State Government launched Iskandar Malaysia, an economic corridor of some 2,200 sq km in the southern part of the state. Oriented to attracting investment and capitalizing on spillovers from neighbouring Singapore, the corridor has nine priority sectors. Three are industrial (electronics, petrochemical, and food/agro processing); and six are service-based (logistics, tourism, health services, education services, finance, and ICT/creative) (Khazanah Nasional, 2006).

To this end, the Malaysian Government has invested some SGD 3.3 billion in infrastructure, largely to expand the road network and upgrade highways. Since 2006, Iskandar has brought in some SGD 46 billion in investment, of which 64% is domestic and the remainder foreign (Malaysian Insider, 24 April 2013). While not all target sectors have done equally well, the corridor has attracted considerable outlays in manufacturing, petrochemicals, logistics, as well as health and education facilities.

There have also been important investments in other parts of Johor. Pengerang, just outside Iskandar Malaysia, is tipped to become a new oil and gas hub. Petronas is investing some SGD 25 billion in the Refinery and Petrochemical Integrated Development (RAPID) project, which will be the corporation's largest processing hub in the country. And, a Dutch firm, Royal Vopak, the Malaysian

Dialog group, and the Johor State Government are investing SGD 2 billion in a deepwater terminal to store Liquefied Natural Gas (The Edge Singapore, 25 February 2013).

Given its proximity to Singapore, and the differential in land and labour costs with its neighbour, Iskandar Malaysia has seen sustained investment from the city-state. Since 2006, more than 300 projects have been set up by Singaporean firms, making the country the largest single investor in the region. Most of these are in manufacturing, and are made by small and medium enterprises (EIU Viewswire, 25 March 2013; Business Times, 21 March 2013). Increasing wage and land costs mean that this trend is likely to continue. OCBC has registered an increase in loans from firms seeking to expand northwards (Channel NewsAsia, 9 April 2013).

However, it was only in the last three years that larger players in Singapore, particularly the government and government-linked corporations, have begun to invest significantly. Following warming relations between Malaysia and Singapore in 2010, Temasek Holdings and Khazanah have invested some SGD 2.2 billion in two “wellness” facilities in Iskandar Malaysia. And, CapitaLand, Temasek, and a Malaysian firm, IWH, are investing some SGD 340 million in a real estate project on the Johor Bahru waterfront (The Edge Malaysia, 11 March 2013). Other players such as Ascendas and billionaire Peter Lim are also investing in the state (The Edge Malaysia, 21 January 2013).

Projects in the pipeline also bode well for greater connectivity between Singapore and Malaysia, which would further boost investment into the region. The Prime Ministers of both nations are discussing a high-speed rail-link between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, which would also stop in Johor Bahru and other locations in the state. Talks are also underway for a mass transit link between Singapore and Johor Bahru, as well as a possible third road link and increased ferry services (The Edge Singapore, 25 February 2013).

In sum, after a longish lead time, Iskandar Malaysia has finally begun to bear fruit. However, the federal and state governments, both controlled by Barisan Nasional, have had to invest considerable political and financial capital in the region.

THE HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSION

Johor is a large, multi-ethnic state and has been for quite some time. Indeed, for substantial periods, it was a Chinese majority state. The consolidation of the rubber-based economy in the early 20th century as well as a liberal immigration policy, led to substantial inflows of people from China, India, Java, and Sumatra. In the early days, most immigrants were male, who intended to return to their respective

countries. However, after 1930, immigration regulations were tightened, the gender balance evened out, and the population became more sedentary (Lees, 1964). As a result, Johor came to have a large and ethnically diverse population. After World War II, the state had the second largest population of the territories in Malaya, behind Perak, and it housed one of the country's largest Chinese populations (Del Tufo, 1947).

The Malaysian Chinese Association, the second largest component party of Barisan Nasional, has a long association with Johor. Founded in 1949, many of the first generation leaders were English-educated economic elites from Malacca, Selangor, Penang, and Perak. However, because of its demographics, by the late 1950s, Johor had the third largest membership base in the country, behind only Perak and Selangor (Heng, 1988). Key to this was its work in New Villages during the Emergency, a result of which was an extensive network of party offices throughout the state. A growing number of party leaders have come from, or held seats, in the state. Four out of the eleven MCA Presidents have a connection to Johor, including Lee San Choon, Neo Yee Pan, Ling Liong Sik, and the current President, Chua Soi Lek (MCA website).

For UMNO, the connection is much, much deeper. Prior to the introduction of parliamentary democracy at the state and federal levels, Johor was led by a number of dynamic sultans. These sultans sought to build a modern, forward-looking state, while limiting British influence. Fuelled by agricultural exports, by the 1890s, Johor had a government with 320 officials working in 20 government departments that oversaw three hospitals, fourteen schools, a steamship service, a coast guard, and an army (Singapore and Straits Directory, 1893).

Britain secured formal influence over Johor only in 1914, when it posted an Adviser to the territory. However, while the British sought to control most of the bureaucracy, their success was limited as the Sultan had negotiated a series of concessions that enabled him to curtail policies he disagreed with. Thus, while he welcomed a considerable number of expatriate technical personnel, he strove to ensure that the apex of the government was from Johor and loyal to him (Gray, 1978). Up until the Second World War, the territory's burgeoning rubber economy allowed a high level of government expenditure, and the state came to have one of Malaya's largest education systems (Malayan Yearbook, 1939).

In the aftermath of the Second World War, a Malay nationalist movement emerged in response to British plans to create a unitary government that would have effectively eliminated the sultanates (Stockwell, 1979). In this context, Johor's relatively literate population and core of senior administrators provided an ideal breeding ground for Malay political associations to emerge. Many of these were absorbed into UMNO, which was established as an umbrella organization and many Johorean leaders subsequently assumed senior positions within the party

(Hutchinson, forthcoming).

Onn Jaafar, the former *Mentri Besar* of Johor, founded UMNO in 1946, and was its first President until 1951. Johor Bahru also housed the national headquarters of UMNO until 1955, after which it was moved to Kuala Lumpur.

However, the impact of Johor goes beyond Onn Jaafar and encompasses a whole generation of Malay leaders that worked in the Johor government before moving into politics. Indeed, for the first decade of its existence, a full quarter of UMNO's leadership came from Johor, more than any other state (Funston, 1980). Johoreans also dominated ancillary sections of the party, supplying the first and third Presidents of the Youth wing, and the second, third, and fourth presidents of the Women's wing (Arriful Ahmadi, 2000).

Other notable Johoreans that began their careers in that territory's government include: Hussein Onn (third Prime Minister); Abdul Rahman Yassin (first President of the Senate); Mohamad Noah bin Omar (first Speaker of the Lower House); Suleiman Abdul Rahman (first Minister for Local Government, Housing and Town Planning); and Sardon Jubir (first Minister for Public Works).²

While UMNO's top leadership is now more diverse in geographic terms, Johor still retains a considerable amount of power within the party. Beyond the historical aspect, UMNO is said to have some 400,000 members in the state, making it the country's largest. In addition, the party's internal structure mirrors the country's parliamentary structure and, consequently, Johor has a large number of divisions that give it considerable influence within UMNO.

Today, a number of national-level political figures come from Johor, such as Muhyiddin Yassin, Deputy Prime Minister, and Hishamuddin Hussein, Minister for Home Affairs. However, it would appear that the 'stock' of the party is decreasing somewhat. In the 2009 party elections, a number of Johoreans lost their bids for positions in the Supreme Council, UMNO's highest decision making body. Thus, Shahrir Samad, Azalina Othman, and Abdul Ghani Othman, the current *Mentri Besar* of Johor, all failed to attain the necessary votes.

ON THE GROUND TODAY

While UMNO Johor may have lost some influence at the national level, Barisan Nasional's consistent electoral performance at the state level has meant that strategists are relying on known quantities. Johor's consistent economic growth, increased rates of public and private investment, and a long record of stability and consensual negotiation between UMNO and MCA constitute Barisan Nasional's

² Tun Ismail Abdul Rahman was Malaysia's second Deputy Prime Minister. While also from Johor and related to Abdul Rahman Yassin and Suleiman Abdul Rahman, Tun Ismail did not work in the Johor government before entering politics.

platform. Whereas elsewhere in the country, BN has opted to renew many of its candidates, it is not doing so in Johor. Seventeen serving Barisan MPs have been fielded again as candidates (Straits Times, 17 April 2013)

At present, Pakatan Rakyat holds one parliamentary and six state seats. However, Lim Kit Siang has declared that the Opposition aims to wrest 19 parliamentary and 30 state seats in Johor from Barisan Nasional (Lim Kit Siang's website). At first glance, Pakatan Rakyat has a steep hill to climb.

That said, Barisan Nasional will need to effectively answer voter concerns on a number of fronts. A recent national poll found that voters are concerned about corruption, inflation and cost of living, crime and security, and access to housing (Merdeka Center, 2013). Beyond Barisan Nasional's inability to effectively address these at the national level, there are a number of structural changes that may affect its electoral fortunes at the local level.

First, Johor is no longer a rural state. Its structural shift away from agriculture towards manufacturing has been accompanied by increased urbanization. At present, 72% of Johor's population is urban. This demographic shift makes the state different from traditional Barisan Nasional heartlands with smaller urban populations such as Pahang (51%), Perlis (51%), and Sabah (54%) (Department of Statistics, 2012). In these areas, the coalition is favoured by its extensive grassroots machinery and favourable coverage in the mainstream media. In contrast, voters in urban areas are more 'connected' to alternative media sources and are more likely to focus on issues such as corruption, quality of governance, and housing issues.

Second, as elsewhere in the country, Johor has a relatively young population, with a large number of first-time voters. Some 225,000 residents of the state aged 21-24 will be eligible to vote in these elections for the first time, and another 277,000 are aged 25-29 (calculated from Department of Statistics, 2010). At some 27% of the total eligible voting population, the under-30 cohort could prove pivotal, particularly in urban areas. Given their youth and different cultural context, Barisan Nasional will not have the same social capital with this group as with older residents.

Third, at the national level, there has been a shift in the Chinese community away from Barisan Nasional. In a poll carried out in January of this year, the Merdeka Center found that 72% of Chinese respondents in Peninsular Malaysia were dissatisfied with the government, versus a national average of 41% (Merdeka Center, 2013). If this translates into votes in Johor, Barisan Nasional could suffer in a number of seats with large numbers of Chinese voters. The parliamentary seats of Gelang Petah, Segamat, Kulai, Kluang, Ayer Hitam, and Batu Pahat and their state assembly seats are vulnerable. That said, even if the Chinese vote is heavily in favour of the Opposition, Pakatan Rakyat will still need to carry some Malay votes in each ward to win.

Fourth, while Iskandar Malaysia and other large-scale projects have the potential to bring in investment and generate jobs, there are questions about the distribution of benefits. House prices are rising in Southern Johor, and land acquisition issues have arisen regarding the oil and gas projects in Pengerang. Some 22,500 acres of land are slated for the project, and concerns have been raised about compensation and residents' loss of income due to pollution (The Edge Malaysia, March 14 2013).

That said, beyond the benefits of incumbency and other national-level structural factors, there are a number of local-level features that play to Barisan Nasional's advantage. First, despite the state's substantial number of Chinese voters, they are concentrated in a small number of seats and most parliamentary and state seats are still Malay-majority. This is particularly the case for lowly populated rural constituencies in the middle and eastern part of the state. The demographics of seats such as Kota Tinggi, Sembrong, and Tenggara are similar to those in Pahang, another Barisan Nasional stronghold.

In addition, the Opposition will find it hard to make headway in Malay-majority seats for two reasons. First, Johor has a long tradition of state government control of religion as well as religious education. The Sultans of Johor took a direct interest in religion, promoting secular education combined with a moderate version of Islam. Local scholars were sent overseas for learning and were charged with establishing religious schools upon their return (Milner, 1995). As such, the state government has retained control over religious schools, unlike northern states such as Kelantan and Kedah which have networks of community-run religious schools. These schools, called pondoks, have been an important means through which the Islamic opposition party, PAS, has gained support. As a result, PAS has found it particularly difficult to make inroads in Johor (interviews with UMNO and PAS members, Johor 2010).

Second, Johor has the second highest number of FELDA settlements in the country. FELDA was a large-scale agricultural development scheme to attack rural poverty in the post-independence period. The scheme has been credited with lifting many Malay families from rural areas out of poverty, and its settlers are usually staunch BN voters. Johor's 74 settlements cut across almost half of the state's assembly seats and could prove pivotal (Malaysian Insider, Feb 18, 2013).

POSSIBLE OUTCOMES

In all likelihood, the Barisan Nasional will lose a number of parliamentary and state assembly seats in urban areas, but will retain control of the state government and most parliamentary seats.

Assuming that Barisan Nasional retains power at both national and state levels, the first issue is who the next Mentri Besar will be. The incumbent, Abdul Ghani Othman, has been serving since 1995. His desire to return to federal-level politics is well-known, and he has yielded his Serom state assembly seat to fellow UMNO member Abdul Razak bin Minhat. Should he prevail against Lim Kit Siang for the Gelang Petah parliamentary seat, it is likely that he will be offered a significant national-level position.

The most likely replacement for Mentri Besar is Khaled Nordin, the current Minister of Higher Education. He was tipped as Ghani's replacement in 2004 and 2008, but remained at the federal level. Khaled is rumoured to be in favour with the Sultan of Johor, and is also closely affiliated with the long-serving MP for Johor Bahru, Sharir Samad as well the former Deputy Prime Minister, Musa Hitam. He is running in the state seat of Permas, which is part of his former parliamentary constituency. Low-key by nature, Khaled can perhaps be seen as a traditional politician, more at home negotiating behind the scenes. Should he take over, it will most likely be business as usual.

In the unlikely event that the Opposition takes Johor, Salahuddin Ayub is tipped to be Mentri Besar. It is unlikely that there will be any major policy changes and Anwar Ibrahim, the leader of PKR, has stated that the Opposition will not stop Iskandar Malaysia (Malaysian Insider, April 24, 2013).

A potential twister is that the Iskandar Regional Development Authority, the statutory body charged with managing Iskandar Malaysia, is jointly headed by the Prime Minister and Chief Minister of Johor. Should different parties be in power at either level, policy differences based on distinct national and state-level priorities could emerge. Land zoning and administration is a state government prerogative, and this is a vital factor for Iskandar Malaysia's management.

Given that Barisan Nasional is most likely to retain the state, it is at the parliamentary level that the stakes are highest for individual politicians. Key contests include:

Pagoh – Muhyiddin Yassin (Deputy Prime Minister/Minister of Education, UMNO Deputy President) v Mohd Rozali Jamil (PAS)

Sembrong – Hishamuddin Hussein (Home Affairs Minister) v Onn Abu Bakar (PKR)

Pengerang – Azalina Othman (former Tourism Minister, UMNO) v Dayangku Intan (PKR) and Mohamad Azaman Johari (independent)

Johor Bahru – Sharir Samad (former Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister, UMNO) v Hashim Hussein (PKR - former Army Chief)

Pulai – Nur Jazlan (UMNO) v Salahuddin Ayub (Vice President, PAS)

Gelang Petah – Abdul Ghani Othman (outgoing Johor Mentri Besar, UMNO) v Lim Kit Siang (Parliamentary Leader, DAP)

Segamat – Subramaniam Sathasivam (Human Resources Minister, MIC Deputy President) v Chua Jui Meng (Leader, PKR Johor)

Kluang – Hou Kok Chung (Deputy Minister of Higher Education, MCA) v Liew Chin Tong (Shadow Minister of Defence, DAP)

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