

RESEARCHERS AT SINGAPORE'S INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 7 Apr 2014

Changes Remain Unclear after Malaysia's Kajang By-Election

By Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani *

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The recent Kajang by-election was held after its state assemblyman resigned to allow Anwar Ibrahim to contest for the position in the state legislature, and purportedly subsequently to become chief minister of the Selangor state. This change in state leadership was seen as a way to strengthen the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) government in the state, which is in apparent crisis resulting from infighting between Chief Minister Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) Deputy President Azmin Ali.
- In the event, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, who is PKR president, replaced her husband, Anwar Ibrahim, as candidate after the latter was disqualified from running. MCA heavyweight Chew Mei Fun was nominated by her party to run against her.
- The results saw an increased victory margin of 19 per cent for PKR, which managed to gain more support from the Malay community. While both parties recorded less Chinese votes because of the lower turnout from that community, the drop in support was larger for PKR than for Barisan Nasional (BN). The results also showed a slight shift in Malay votes to PKR.

* **Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani** is Visiting Fellow at ISEAS; email: mohd_azizuddin_mohd_sani@iseas.edu.sg

- However, the overall results showed that many Chinese voted for party rather than for ethnic affiliation.
- While the results should no significant overall change from the result of the general election held last year, the inclusion of Wan Azizah in Selangor is expected to help resolve PKR's internal crisis in time for its party election scheduled to be held in May 2014.

INTRODUCTION

On 23 March 2014, a by-election was held in Kajang following the resignation two months earlier, on 27 January, of state assemblyman Lee Chin Cheh of the People Justice Party (PKR, Parti Keadilan Rakyat). The resignation was strategically planned by the party to allow opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim to contest. Should he win—which was almost a certainty—he would then be eligible to become *Menteri Besar* (Chief Minister) for the state of Selangor. The purpose of bringing Anwar to Selangor from Penang was to strengthen the Pakatan Rakyat (PR, People Alliance) government in Selangor which is in crisis following infighting between the camp of Chief Minister Khalid Ibrahim and those aligned to PKR Deputy President Azmin Ali. It is feared that failure to resolve this crisis would provide a big advantage for the Barisan Nasional (BN) to regain Selangor state in the next general election due by 2018.

Polling for early and postal voters was scheduled for 19 March, and Election Day for 23 March. Although nominations were to be made on 11 March 2014, PKR had already announced a few weeks earlier that their candidate would be Anwar Ibrahim. On 7 March, however, the Court of Appeal ruled in favour of the earlier guilty verdict in Anwar's long-standing sodomy case, thus disqualifying him from contesting in Kajang. This came as a big shock to his party, who responded by choosing Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, President of PKR, to run in his stead.

But even without Anwar as the candidate, the Kajang by-election was still going to be the biggest contest of the year by virtue of BN's decision to nominate Chew Mei Fun, a MCA heavyweight, to run against Wan Azizah. Chew is a well-known figure in Kajang.

Despite the significance of the by-election, the campaign for the Kajang by-election however came to be eclipsed by the unfortunate disappearance of the Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 a day after the Court of Appeal decision.

ELECTION ISSUES

Kajang, well known for its *satay*, is located in eastern Selangor in the Hulu Langat parliamentary constituency, which has a population of 342,657 consisting of 60.4 per cent Malays, 19.3 per cent Chinese, 9.7 per cent Indians, and 10.6 per cent from other groups.¹ The Kajang state constituency has 39,278 eligible voters, of whom 48 per cent are Malays, 41 per cent Chinese and 10 per cent Indians. Several polling stations were located in Malay-dominated areas (such as Sungai Kantan, Taman Mesra, Saujana Impian, Sungai Sekamat, Kantan Permai, Batu 10 Cheras and Taman Delima), while seven were Chinese-dominated (Sungai Chua Satu, Sungai Chua

¹ *The Malaysian Insider*. 2 February 2014. "Kajang folk excited over prospect of having 'star' assemblyman", retrieved 1 April 2014, from <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/kajang-folk-excited-over-prospect-of-having-star-assemblyman>.

Dua, Sungai Chua Tiga, Sungai Chua Empat, Sungai Chua Lima, Kajang and Bandar Kajang). The areas of Taman Kajang Baharu and Taman Kota Cheras were mixed. The Election Commission deployed 673 officials for the election, which saw the use of 18 polling centres, and the total cost incurred for the event was estimated at MYR 1.6 million.²

Persistent issues for Kajang voters have been traffic congestion, inadequate sanitation, and water rationing.³ Its young voters have also been concerned about the high cost of living, the price hike of essential goods, and other matters such as crime, education, and public transport. This segment of the voting population has however been receiving close attention from BN, to the extent that UMNO Youth Chief Khairy Jamaluddin had declared that BN would gain most of the young Malay and Indian votes. Chinese youths have been slow to respond to BN initiatives.⁴

PKR revealed a 'four-point election manifesto' on 12 March which pledged to provide better waste and traffic management; tackle crime by increasing security measures; carry out programmes for young people and entrepreneurs; and tackle racial and religious issues.⁵ The party's campaign also sought to discredit Prime Minister Najib Razak's government on national issues such as incompetence in the handling of the MH370 disappearing aircraft case, conspiracy to remove Anwar from contesting by re-enacting the sodomy conviction, alleged excessive spending by Najib and his wife Rosmah Mansor, corruption and abuse of power, unfair controlled reporting by the mass media, and the government's funding of Malay-rights group Perkasa.

PKR also portrayed Wan Azizah as a housewife struggling to fight the injustice suffered by her husband. At the same time, she tried to attract the 20,262 registered women voters who made up 52 per cent of the total voting population in Kajang. The head of the party's women's wing, Zuraida Kamaruddin, who is also the Member of Parliament for Ampang, said that the party would aim to win at least 60 per cent or 12,157 votes of women voters. PKR had received only 40 per cent of women votes in the 2013 general election.⁶

On the other side of the divide, Chew Mei Fun seemed the natural choice for the MCA to make if it were to compete for women and Chinese votes. She was also portrayed by her party as a down-to-earth mother. According to Chew, garnering 30 per cent of Chinese votes in Kajang would be a credible indication of public acceptance

² Ibid.

³ Christina Tan. 19 March 2014. "Kajang by-election: Kajang folk say they have endured poor conditions long enough". *The Star Online*, retrieved 20 March 2014, at <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2014/03/19/Looking-forward-to-a-change-Kajang-folk-say-they-have-endured-poor-conditions-long-enough/>.

⁴ Lukman Abdullah. 21 March 2014. "Mengejar sokongan 30 % pengundi muda atas pagar". *Agenda Daily*, retrieved 21 March 2014, at <http://www.agendadaily.com/berita-utama/318-analisa/11015-mengejar-sokongan-30-pengundi-muda-atas-pagar.html>.

⁵ *The Sun Daily*. 12 March 2014. "PKR unveils 4-point manifesto", retrieved 23 March 2014, at <http://www.thesundaily.my/news/984319>.

⁶ Azrin Anuar. 10 March 2014. "PKR hopes to win over 60 % Kajang's women voters". *FZ.com*. Retrieved 21 March 2014, at <http://www.fz.com/content/pkr-hopes-win-over-60-kajang-women-voters>.

of the new MCA leadership.⁷ In the 13th general election, BN only managed to win 18 per cent of Chinese vote. She argued that without that level of support it would be difficult for MCA to fight for their needs.⁸ In addition to targeting the Chinese vote, BN also attempted to ensure that at least 70 per cent of the Malays voted for Chew.⁹

Chew did not provide any manifesto but nevertheless made pledges that were similar to Wan Azizah's. With the slogan 'For Integrity and Credibility', she promised to organize more cultural activities to promote Kajang as a cultural city, collaborate with the police in overcoming crime,¹⁰ establish a service centre as a platform for dialogue between the people and the City Council, improve public transportation, resolve traffic congestion, and tackle flash floods in Kajang. She also promised to act as a constructive opposition leader by checking and balancing the state government, bring unity among the people, and resolve local issues.

THE RESULT

PKR was strongly expected to win the by-election, and a loss would have sent shockwaves through the PKR leadership and the Selangor state government. It would also greatly have impacted the PKR election scheduled for May 2014.¹¹

At the general election last year, PKR's Lee Chin Cheh had garnered 19,571 votes followed by Lee Ban Seng (Barisan Nasional-MCA) with 12,747 votes, and Mohamad Ismail (Berjasa) with 1,014 votes. Voter turnout was 87.9 per cent, with 541 votes spoilt.¹² In the event, PKR did win the Kajang by-election with a slightly smaller majority. Wan Azizah received 16,741 votes, while Chew could only get 11,363 votes. There were only 176 spoilt votes, which meant that protest votes were insignificant. Wan Azizah was able to win with a 5,379 majority, down from the 6,824 won by PKR last year.

The reduced majority, however, does not necessarily indicate a more influential MCA. Wan Azizah may have won 2,830 fewer votes than had been won by Lee in the general election, while Chew received 1,385 less than what her party won last year,

⁷ Patrick Sennyah. 23 March 2014. "Kajang goes to the polls". *FZ.com*, retrieved 23 March 2014, at <http://www.fz.com/content/kajang-goes-poll#ixzz2wkTgEwbU>.

⁸ Lee Hooi Boon. 2014. "MCA hopes to get 30% of the Chinese votes in Kajang". *The Sun Daily*. 13 March, retrieved 21 March 2014, from <http://www.thesundaily.my/news/985422>.

⁹ *New Straits Times*. 2014. "Umno expects to deliver over 70pc Malay votes in Kajang". 17 March, retrieved 23 March 2014, from <http://www.nst.com.my/latest/umno-expects-to-deliver-over-70pc-malay-votes-in-kajang-1.518154#ixzz2wi165NUk>.

¹⁰ *New Straits Times*. 20 March 2014. "Kajang by-election: Chew pledges to implement '3E' concept to fight crime", retrieved 20 March 2014, from <http://www.nst.com.my/latest/kajang-by-election-chew-pledges-to-implement-3e-concept-to-fight-crime-1.522174#ixzz2whwEpV8l>.

¹¹ Regina Lee. 25 May 2013. "PKR to postpone party elections". *The Star Online*, retrieved 20 March 2014, from <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2013/05/25/PKR-to-postpone-party-elections.aspx/>.

¹² *The Malaysian Insider*. 2 February 2014. "Kajang folk excited over prospect of having 'star' assemblyman", retrieved 1 April 2014, at <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/kajang-folk-excited-over-prospect-of-having-star-assemblyman>.

but this was influenced by the fact that only 28,358 voters, or 72.09 per cent, turned up to vote. This was what showed up as PKR's reduced majority.

In a press conference after her victory, Wan Azizah pointed out that Pakatan Rakyat managed to increase its share of the popular vote by 2.9 per cent despite the lower turnout, and that PKR garnered 59.9 per cent of all votes cast compared with 57 per cent in the general election.¹³ This time around, PKR won over BN by nearly 19 per cent compared to 17.9 per cent in 2013.

There are several other interesting observations worth making here. First, PKR managed to win in five Malay-dominated areas—which were considered UMNO strongholds—where it lost in the general election. For instance in Sungai Sekamat, PKR won by 45 votes compared to losing 239 votes in the general election. Likewise in Taman Delima, PKR won by the slim margin of 3 votes, unlike in the general election when it lost by 239 votes. All in all, PKR managed to secure a win in almost all 18 polling stations (except for two early/postal vote stations and two Malay-dominated polling stations, namely Sungai Kantan and Batu 10 Cheras).

In contrast, the BN majority in Sungai Kantan was reduced to 225 votes down from 420 in the general election; and to 151 in Batu 10 Cheras.¹⁴ There was clearly a slight increase in Malay support for PKR. There are two possibilities why this happened. First, although most of the votes cast were party-oriented rather than candidate-oriented, a small number of Malay voters were believed to have voted for the PKR candidate because she was a Malay. Second, there were sympathy votes for Wan Azizah as a woman fighting for her husband who was seen as being unjustly treated by the BN government. Third, by announcing the candidate and starting their campaign activities earlier—even before nomination day—PKR managed to reach out to more voters.

Another observation is that BN actually received more votes from the Chinese community. There was an increase in Chinese votes for BN from 18 per cent in the general election to 25 per cent in the by-election. However, BN failed to achieve 30 per cent support from Chinese voters. This increase in Chinese votes for BN was due to several factors. According to DAP strategist Dr Ong Kian Ming, the decrease in support for PKR was due to the lower turnout, which included many of the 2,400 'outstation' voters who did not return to vote. He explained that "many of them are living outside Kajang and the majority are Chinese working in Johor and Singapore. They won't come back again, especially when the outcome is not in doubt".¹⁵ In addition, there is a slightly stronger tendency for Chinese residents in Kajang to vote

¹³ Eileen Ng and Sheridan Mahavera. 23 March 2014. "PKR retains Kajang in low-key by-election". *The Malaysian Insider*, retrieved 24 March 2014, at <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/pkr-retains-kajang-in-low-key-by-election>.

¹⁴ Zulkifli Sulong. 24 March 2014. "PRK Kajang: PKR kurang majoriti tetapi berjaya tembusi kubu kuat Melayu Umno". *The Malaysian Insider*, retrieved 24 March 2014, at <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/bahasa/article/prk-kajang-pkr-kurang-majoriti-tetapi-berjaya-tembusi-kubu-kuat-melayu-umno>.

¹⁵ Eileen Ng. 24 March 2014. "Chinese not returning to BN, they just didn't return to vote, says DAP". *The Malaysian Insider*, retrieved 24 March 2014, at <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/print/malaysia/chinese-not-returning-to-bn-they-just-didnt-return-to-vote-says-dap>.

for a Chinese candidate. Therefore, Chew was actually able to attract some of these votes for BN.

However, the overwhelming 75 per cent support given by the Chinese community to a Malay candidate goes towards showing that Chinese voters based their decision on party rather than candidature. In fact, the biggest majority win by PKR from a polling station in Kajang was in Sungai Chua Satu, a Chinese-dominated area, with 1,725 votes.

When asked to comment on her win in the Kajang by-election, Wan Azizah said “the result shows that we have won based on the issues that we raised. We also found that votes from the youth have increased (especially from the Malay-dominated areas), and also votes from the Malays. This is a healthy trend and positive... This is not only a first step for Kajang but also towards Putrajaya.”¹⁶

WHAT'S NEXT?

After winning the Kajang by-election, Wan Azizah is now in a position to directly influence Selangor state policies. However, there is no indication yet that she will move to replace Khalid Ibrahim as Selangor *Menteri Besar*. She was seen to have favoured Khalid for Menteri Besar following the general election last year and still maintains good relations with him. It is therefore increasingly believed that Khalid will continue as *Menteri Besar* and that Wan Azizah, together with her husband, will become mediators in resolving the infighting between Khalid and Azmin.

For Chew and MCA, soul searching continues to be needed to rebrand MCA and to regain the support of the Chinese community before the next general election. As a vice president of the party, Chew is expected to be appointed senator in *Dewan Negara* (Upper House) and, subsequently, a minister in the federal government.

¹⁶ Ikhwan Zulkaflee and K. Pragalath. 23 March 2014. PKR retains Kajang with lower majority. *Free Malaysia Today*, retrieved 24 March 2014, at <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2014/03/23/unofficial-pkr-retains-kajang-with-lower-majority/>.

ISEAS Perspective is published electronically by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
30, Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang, Singapore 119614
Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955
Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735

Homepage: www.iseas.edu.sg

ISEAS accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed. Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.

Comments are welcomed and may be sent to the author(s).

© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.

Editorial Chairman: Tan Chin Tiong

Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng

Production Editors: Benjamin Loh, Su-Ann Oh and Lee Poh Onn

Editorial Committee: Terence Chong, Francis E. Hutchinson and Daljit Singh