

PERSPECTIVE

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Selangor in GE14: The Big Prize Fight Up in the Air

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Executive summary

- The stakes are high for Malaysia's 14th General Elections in Selangor, Malaysia's richest and most urbanized state governed for ten years by the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition.
- PH has established a foothold in urban and ethnically mixed constituencies, while Barisan Nasional (BN) is confined to Malay majority areas.
- PH is poised to retain the majority of the popular vote, amid widespread economic discontent and corruption scandals associated with the BN federal government.
- However, PH's prospects for retaining the majority of Selangor state assembly seats is clouded in uncertainty, due to three-cornered contests involving the two coalitions and the Islamist PAS, and the re-delineation of electoral boundaries that favours BN.

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INTRODUCTION

The fight for the big prize of Selangor state in Malaysia's upcoming 14th General Elections (GE14) promises a heated and decisive contest, and a lot of uncertainties. Selangor is the most populous, prosperous and urbanized state in the country, accounting for 19 percent of the national population, and together with Kuala Lumpur where millions of Selangorians work, generates 38 percent of the national GDP. The state's median household income of RM7,225 per month is 38% above the national median. Governing Selangor grants levers to showcase prestige and progress, distribute patronage, determine land use, and oversee state government-linked companies and state-owned entities such as Universiti Selangor.

GE14 will be momentous, whoever wins. For Pakatan Harapan (PH), the fact that it is holding power will boost morale and relevance. Barisan Nasional (BN) has declared retaking Selangor a top priority. The coalitions will vie for the ballots of up two million registered voters, of which 50.2% identify as Malay, 34.0% as Chinese, 14.5% as Indian, and 1.3% with other groups. At stake are 56 state assembly seats and 22 federal parliament seats.

PH holds the advantages of incumbency and looks to have sustained the popular majority, but it faces major hurdles in retaining a majority of state assembly seats, while some parliamentary constituencies are also open races. Three months at most to the elections, uncertainty prevails, due to the prospect of three-cornered contests involving BN, PH and the Islamist party, PAS, and the consequences of electoral re-delineation tilting in BN's favour.

This Perspective provides some background to elections in Selangor, discusses salient issues and electoral dynamics, and unpacks the unpredictable factors.

RECENT ELECTIONS: RESULTS AND SHARP BATTLE LINES

In recent history, Selangor's popular vote has moved in tandem with economic conditions and political watersheds. While BN dominated in winning seats in the 1990s through to 2004, its share of the popular vote was much lower, and fluctuated more than in any other state.¹ BN enjoyed a surge of popularity between 1990 and 1995, at the acme of the economic boom, but fell back in 1999 in the wake of economic recession and the *reformasi* ferment. Indeed, the long-term trend shows a decline in BN's popularity from 1995, with only a slight upswing in 2004, despite the coalition's landslide victory in terms of legislative seats. Selangor voters decidedly swung to Pakatan Rakyat in 2008 and 2013 (Figure 1). This marked a clear break from the past and a reversal of fortune, with Pakatan consolidating its hold on urban, ethnically mixed constituencies, exactly the kind of influence that had previously been the BN's winning formula.

GE13 results starkly correlate with ethnic composition and geography. Areas with high concentration of Chinese voters resoundingly voted for Pakatan. A mapping of the results strikingly illustrates UMNO winning in predominantly Malay, rural Northern Selangor (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Barisan Nasional in Selangor: General Election results, 1990-2013

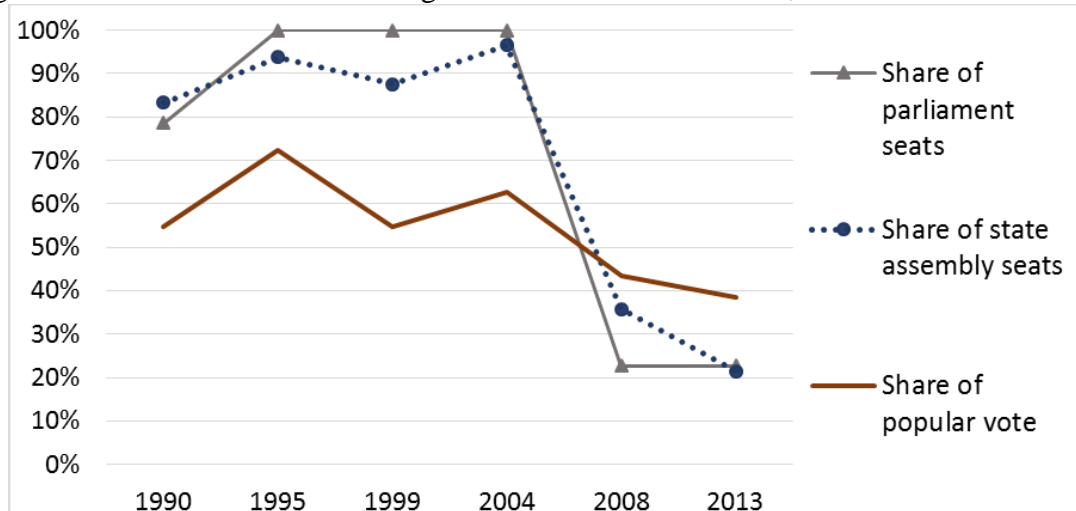
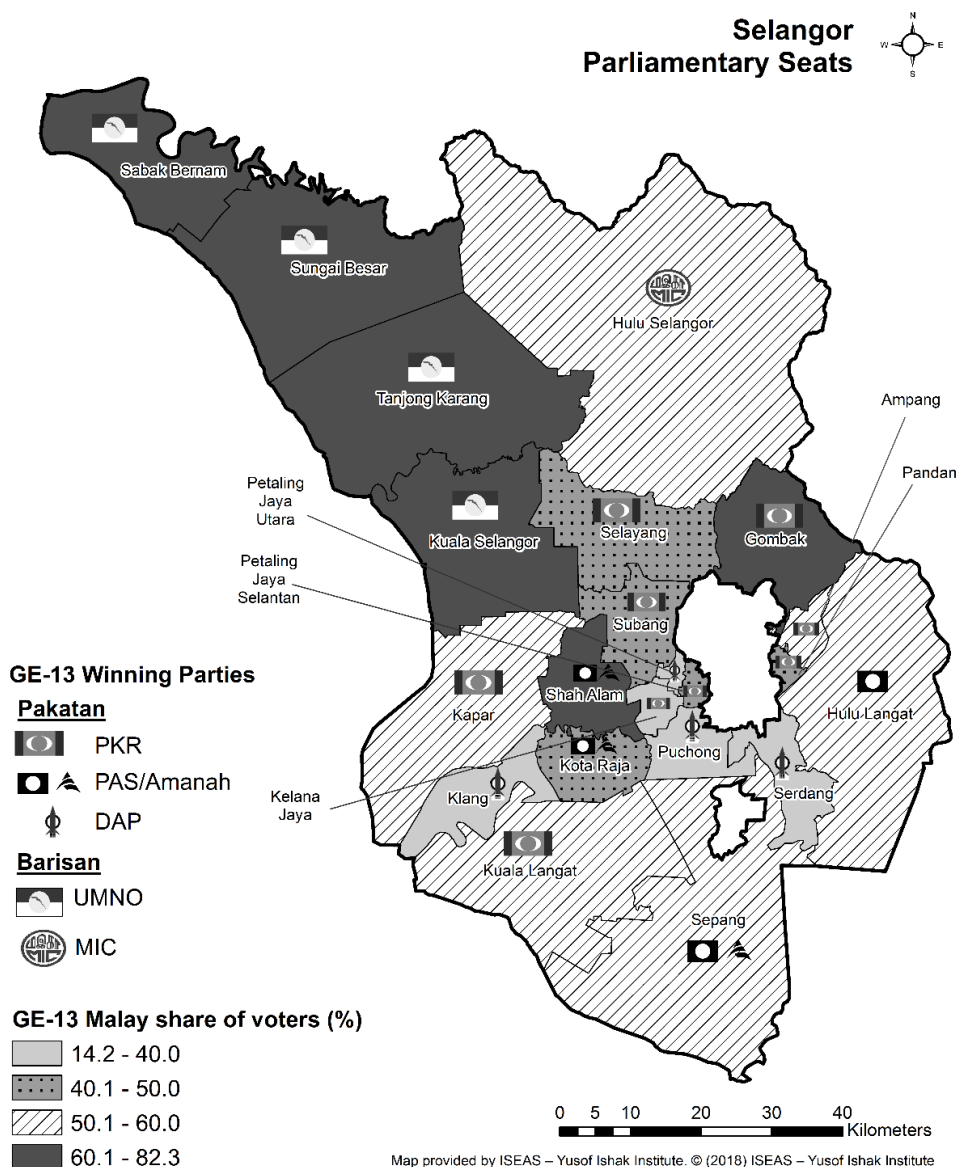


Figure 2. GE13 Selangor parliament seats: Malay share of voters and winning party



The performance of both coalitions' component parties, in terms of win rates and margins, also shows marked contrasts. Pakatan Rakyat's members convincingly won most or all contests, securing 80 percent of Selangor state assembly and federal parliament seats. PAS made the most gains, at UMNO's expense, and mostly in ethnically mixed constituencies. Pakatan won by large margins and dominated in urban areas, while Barisan Nasional managed victories by slim majorities, and has been reduced to UMNO, with Chinese party MCA and Indian party MIC suffering comprehensive losses, barring one parliamentary seat for MIC (Tables 1 and 2).²

Extrapolating the GE13 results onto the present, PH holds a considerable number of "safe" seats – defined here as those where the winner won at least 60% of votes – but also a number with lesser buffers. As the current situation stands, PH holds 29 seats (13 PKR, 14 DAP, 2 Amanah) in the state assembly, a razor-thin majority out of the 56 seats, with PAS holding 13 and UMNO 12, with 2 declared independents. Of course, the split of PAS from Pakatan and potential re-delineation of constituency boundaries further alters scenarios.

Table 1. GE13: Selangor federal parliament seats and "competitive" status (% votes won)

Party	# seats contested	# seats won	Average victory margin	Safe seats (> 60%)	Fairly safe seats (55%–60%)	Marginal seats (≤55%)
<u>Pakatan Rakyat</u>						
PKR	11	9	18,512	3	4	2
DAP	4	4	36,091	4		
PAS*	7	4	14,686	1	2	1
<u>Barisan Nasional</u>						
UMNO	10	4	1,786		1	3
MIC	5	1	3,414			1
MCA	7	0				

Note: * Three MPs have switched to Amanah

Table 2. GE13: Selangor state assembly seats and "competitive" status (% votes won)

Party	# seats contested	# seats won	Average victory margin	Safe seats (> 60%)	Fairly safe seats (55%–60%)	Marginal seats (≤55%)
PKR**	21	14	7,711	5	4	5
DAP**	15	15	13,311	12	1	2
PAS*	20	15	5,210	5	4	6
UMNO	35	12	2,259		5	5
MIC/MCA	21	0				

Notes: Omitted: 3-cornered contests in two seats in which UMNO won 42% and 49% of votes.

** One ADUN each in PKR and DAP have moved to independent status

* Two PAS ADUNs have switched to Amanah.

ISSUES, TRENDS AND FACTORS

Economic issues stand out among Malaysia's voters; the same concerns prevail in Selangor. Surveys and on-the-ground reports detect widely felt anxiety and discontent over rising costs of living and stagnant real incomes. There is a general sense that the benefits of economic growth, captured in robust macroeconomic statistics, do not reach ordinary folk. The introduction of goods and services tax in 2015 by the federal BN government provides a target for PH to pin the blame for inflation.³

Social assistance through the federal system has expanded in recent years, most saliently BR1M cash transfers to over seven million recipients nationwide, of which about 15% are in Selangor.⁴ The federal government oversees big-ticket projects, notably public transport in the Klang Valley. Selangor has also rolled out its *Inisiatif Peduli Rakyat* (people care initiative), offering a range of social assistance for low-income households, such as medical cards and basic needs vouchers. Azmin Ali enjoys support as Chief Minister on the back of these policies; the popular outreach has benefited particularly his party PKR. In November 2017, his administration rolled out a winsome 2018 budget, with numerous benefits for low-income households and the state government's 17,500 employees.

The Selangor electorate is generally well informed and concerned with the conduct of public office and with issues such as government, quality service delivery, accountability and integrity. For urban middle classes who are relatively more independent, and young voters, many of whom are newly registered and less partisan, questions over the 1MDB scandal, public misconduct and corruption, will carry some weight.

However, the mood is tepid. The degree of expectancy pales in comparison to GE13; by all indications the record high 80% turnout will not be reproduced. Both coalitions, especially PH, which stands to lose disproportionately more from low turnout, are mindful of the need to energize the vote base and engage new voters. Voter fatigue, after two election cycles in which the theme of change resonated, is perhaps inevitable. But PH has also struggled to present a cohesive strategy and lineup, while UMNO's conduct as opposition in state government and case to be returned to power in Selangor manifestly lack substance and inspiration. The withering of non-UMNO BN parties in the state has resulted in a mono-ethnic front.

FLUX AND UNCERTAINTY

While conditions above put Pakatan in good stead to defend Selangor, GE14 prospects are far from certain, due to two developments: three-cornered contests and electoral re-delineation. Moreover, we still do not know whether and how these factors will materialize.

After Pakatan Rakyat and PAS parted ways in 2015, the latter has vowed to contest widely in Peninsular Malaysia, raising the prospect of three-cornered fights, which will most likely split opposition votes between PAS and now Pakatan Harapan. A unique situation unfolds in Selangor, where Chief Minister Azmin Ali has maintained a rapprochement with PAS and tried for months to negotiate with PAS to avoid three-cornered scenarios. Only in February 2018 did Azmin concede the unworkability of cooperating with PAS. In the PH Selangor election director's words, the coalition has been "gearing for three-cornered

fighters”.⁵ UMNO’s disposition, reflected in the Kuala Selangor incumbent, is to “focus on one to one”, meaning, UMNO vs PH.⁶

It will now be crucial for PH to forge a united front and present persuasive policies, tap into the widespread anxiety, and woo voters away from PAS and UMNO.⁷ Settling candidacies amicably will also provide assurance of the new pact’s cohesion.

Negotiations have proven more difficult for state assembly seats. PH impressed with its settlement of all 165 Peninsula parliament seat allocations, presented at its 7 January 2018 Convention. Within Selangor, PH will be fronted by PKR in 10 seats, Amanah in 5, DAP 4 and PPBM 3. This represents minimal change, with incumbent parties retained and PPBM taking on UMNO. The candidates’ lineup remains to be determined internally by PH’s component parties, but the coalition’s consensus made a major statement.

State assembly negotiations provide fewer seats to bargain with, and in Selangor the process has been especially contentious and openly tempestuous. It continues to be complicated by the presiding uncertainty over the relationship with PAS, and contests between PKR, Amanah and PPBM over Malay-majority seats, with PKR leveraging on its established presence in Selangor. The extent to which PPBM can draw voters away from UMNO is questionable, but Amanah has more obvious struggles in broadening appeal. As a splinter of PAS, its leaders are tarred as renegades of the religion.

Shah Alam and Kuala Selangor are illustrative of hurdles Amanah candidates face. The sizable proportion of conservative Malay-Muslims in Shah Alam stirs apprehension within Amanah toward its capacity to pull votes from hitherto PAS supporters. In Kuala Selangor, concerns over Amanah’s logo recognition are inducing discussion over the possibility of contesting under another PKR’s banner.⁸

These scenarios elicit varying prognostications. More optimistic readings of PH’s prospects consider that PAS won on the back of non-Malay support, which remains with PH, and a sizable swing of Malay votes their way can deliver the majority. We should note here that the winning contestant only needs to secure more votes than the next highest candidate; it is not necessary to win 50%.

Various opinion polls of 2017 provide reference points, and underscore the uphill task for PH in three-cornered fights. Even the findings of PH-affiliated research institutes report evenly distributed support for government and opposition (with various surveys not differentiating between PH and PAS). Among Malays, UMNO leads by a sizable margin, with PAS and PH quite evenly split⁹. At the same time, we should attach a caveat that these data were captured in early- to mid-2017 and may not be reliable indicators of current sentiments.

Simulations based on GE13 results have also yielded some predictions. It seems broadly agreed that PH can hold Selangor with at least a 5% Malay swing and if it can keep GE13 support levels among non-Malays.¹⁰ However, these exercises assume straight fights and do not account for three-cornered dynamics. The historical record shows that multi-cornered fights overwhelmingly favour BN. The crux for GE14 is the allegiance of PAS supporters, which in the past has shown resolve – even in the face of near certain defeat.¹¹

Electoral re-delineation, a constitutionally mandated exercise started in 2015, has been highly contentious. The Election Commission's first notice (*syor 1*) redrew boundaries more extensively and aggressively in Selangor than in any other state. The new constituency borders gave BN an advantage, basically by increasing the share of Malay voters in some seats to make them competitive for UMNO, and enlarging – thereby diluting the votes in – Pakatan strongholds.¹² The Selangor government, with participation of civil society, has mounted legal challenges and formal public objections. Even BN components expressed disapproval.

One of the starkest examples of unreasonable re-delineation was PKR-held Seri Andalas, which saw the number of voters *decline* from 56,800 to 41,500, and the composition vastly altered, from having 41% Malay and 33% Indian to 74% Malay and 14% Indian. Based on GE13 results, the relocation of voters would reduce PH's majority from 15,600 to 3,600.¹³ On 15 January 2018, the EC produced its second notice (*syor 2*) of the boundaries, which largely and somewhat surprisingly resembled the GE13 boundaries, and omitted the more blatant gerrymandering of constituencies such as Seri Andalas.

There are still elements of ethnicity-based gerrymandering, such as in Ijok, also currently a PKR seat but won by only 739 votes in GE13. The proportion of Malay voters increases from 50 percent to 60.4 percent in the proposed new Ijok.¹⁴ Fundamental features that systemically favour BN through unduly weighting rural votes, also known as malapportionment, are retained.¹⁵ Selangor MPs, notably Rafizi Ramli and Tony Pua, have been at the forefront of public pressure against corruption, especially the 1MDB scandal, while others such as Ong Kian Ming, Wong Chen, and Charles Santiago, have brought substantive policy matters to parliament and the public sphere. They represent urban areas with above 100,000 constituents on average, compared to under 50,000 in the UMNO-held Northern Selangor seats. A less rural-biased electoral system, besides evening the weightage of urban and rural voters, would also increase the number of urban MPs, and potentially enhance parliamentary debate.

A fresh round of formal objections are under way against *syor 2*, but there is still a window for the new boundaries to be presented to Parliament before Prime Minister Najib dissolves the House to usher in GE14. Based on *syor 2* boundaries, and accounting for PAS three-cornered contests, the electoral reform NGO Tindak Malaysia estimates that PH can win 33 seats and thus tenuously hold Selangor.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This Perspective has discussed electoral issues, dynamics and factors that presage an unpredictable GE14. The one certainty is Selangor will be keenly and closely fought. Credible policies and leadership especially on cost of living, welfare and clean government, as well as coalitional cohesion and voter turnout, will be key. Pakatan Harapan's advantages of incumbency and broad economic discontent towards the Barisan Nasional federal government are substantially undercut by guaranteed three-cornered contests with PAS, and compounded by election re-delineation. The big prize is up in the air.

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- ¹ Ong Kian Ming, “The Battle for Selangor in GE14 (Part 1)”, Media Statement, 26 September 2017 (<http://ongkianming.com/2017/09/26/media-statement-the-battle-for-selangor-in-ge14-part-1/>).
- ² The author gratefully acknowledges electoral data provided by Tindak Malaysia.
- ³ Institut Darul Ehsan, “Mood of the Nation, 11-15 August 2017”, Press release, 28 August 2017.
- ⁴ Parliament Hansard, 29 October 2014.
- ⁵ Author’s interview with Xavier Jayakumar, PKR Pakatan Harapan Selangor Election Director and Seri Andalas State Assemblyman, 9 December 2017.
- ⁶ Author’s interview with Irmohizam Ibrahim, UMNO Member of Parliament for Kuala Selangor, 8 December 2017.
- ⁷ “Battle for Selangor, Part 2” media Statement by Ong Kian Ming, DAP Member of Parliament for Serdang, 27 September 2017 (<http://ongkianming.com/2017/09/27/media-statement-battle-for-selangor-part-2/>).
- ⁸ Author’s interviews with Khalid Samad, Amanah Member of Parliament for Shah Alam (5 December 2017), and Dzulkefly Ahmad, Amanah leader and former Member of Parliament for Kuala Selangor (7 December 2017).
- ⁹ Invoke Centre for Policy Initiatives, “GE14 Survey”, 19 January 2017.
- ¹⁰ Invoke Centre for Policy Initiatives, “GE14 Survey”, 19 January 2017, Ong Kian Ming, “Battle for Selangor, Part 3”, 29 September 2017 (<http://ongkianming.com/2017/09/29/media-statement-battle-for-selangor-part-3/>), Politweet, “Election forecast for Pakatan Harapan in Peninsular Malaysia (GE14)” 11 January 2018 (<https://politweet.wordpress.com/2018/01/16/election-forecast-for-pakatan-harapan-in-peninsular-malaysia-ge14/>).
- ¹¹ Author’s correspondence with Tan Seng Keat and Ibrahim Suffian.
- ¹² Malaysiakini team, “How BN benefits from re-delineation in Selangor”, 22 September 2016 (<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/356506>).
- ¹³ <http://www.tindakmalaysia.org/get-involved/maps-of-2016-proposed-redelineation>.
- ¹⁴ Ong Kian Ming, Media Statement: “The Selangor delimitation exercise is guilty of ethnic Gerrymandering”, MP for Serdang and DAP Assistant National Director for Political Education, 17 January 2018 (<http://ongkianming.com/2018/01/17/the-selangor-delimitation-exercise-is-guilty-of-ethnic-gerrymandering/>).
- ¹⁵ Wong Chin Huat, “Analysis of the EC’s 2nd Proposal for Delineation in Selangor”, 18 January 2018, Penang Institute (<https://dart.bersih.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/WCH-20180118-Selangor-Delineation-2nd-Proposal-v2.pdf>).

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