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Some are wondering if the so-called "Green Wave" of support for the Islamist and Malay-nationalist PN has faded and that Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) is no longer safe even in Kelantan, in light of BN's unexpected victory. (Photo by JIMIN LAI / AFP)

The Waning of Malaysia's Green Wave? Too Early to Call

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The Green Wave in Malaysia might have subsided somewhat but it is still alive.

The result of the most recent by-election in Malaysia was unexpected for most. Barisan Nasional (BN) defeated incumbent Perikatan Nasional (PN) in the Nenggiri by-election, in contrast to the series of by-elections since 2022 in which incumbents successfully kept their seats. On top of that, BN bagged the Kelantan state seat of Nenggiri by a [comfortable margin](#) of over 3,000 votes. This ruined PN's chances of gaining ground as they have done in other by-elections.

The [seat became vacant](#) after former Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) state representative chose to publicly back the Anwar Ibrahim government. Due to the anti-party hopping law, the Speaker of the Kelantan State Legislative Assembly declared that Mohd Azizi Abu Naim was no longer a member of Bersatu. In the 2023 Kelantan state election, Mohd Azizi Abu Naim won Nenggiri by a slim 810-vote majority.

Some are [wondering](#) if the so-called "Green Wave" of support for the Islamist and Malay-nationalist PN has faded and that [Parti Islam SeMalaysia \(PAS\) is no longer safe](#) even in Kelantan, in light of BN's unexpected victory. While it may not be as strong as it was in 2022 or 2023, the Unity Government should not be complacent in assuming that BN's Nenggiri victory would be replicated elsewhere.

There is another data point to show the residual strength of the Green Wave. In the Penang state constituency of Sungai Bakap, another by-election was held in July. Compared to BN's victory in Nenggiri, PN successfully [defended the seat](#) with a substantially larger majority: 4,000 in July 2024 versus a smaller 1,500-vote majority in 2023. Although the intensity of the "Green Wave" may have subsided, it has not gone away and has even been consolidated as part of Malay voters' political identity. One of the biggest signs of this is the comfortable majority currently held by PN in Kelantan, with 42 seats out of 45. This represents an increase from the 37 seats PAS won in 2018.

[Malay youth](#) currently identify more with PN partly due to decades of Islamisation of society and government. This is further amplified when juxtaposed with BN's corruption allegations and PH's "liberal" agenda. However, [identity politics can only go so far](#) if another party can offer development and economic stability without compromising on Islamic principles. This is arguably what the Unity Government is doing.

The "Green Wave" refers to a shift towards more religious and conservative politics among the Malay electorate. The term was coined following the unexpected and significant electoral gains made by PAS and its conservative partner Bersatu in the PN coalition. Thus, while the turnout for Chinese and Indian [voters was low](#) in the Sungai Bakap election because of dissatisfaction with the Unity Government, the majority of Malays who voted chose PN. Malay voters, including [United Malay National Organisation \(UMNO\) supporters](#), voted PN, indicating a pull factor from the Islamist-led coalition.

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To make sense of the two results, one must understand the uniqueness of Nenggiri within the context of the state, and the differences between voter sentiment in Kelantan and Penang.

The state legislative assembly of Kelantan has been managed by PAS since 1990. From 2004 to 2023, however, Nenggiri was represented by a BN member. The constituency's ties to BN are especially strong. In 1986, the federal constituency of Gua Musang was created. From that year till 2022, veteran UMNO politician Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah held the ward. (Nenggiri, a state seat, is part of Gua Musang.)

Mohd Azizi Abu Naim's narrow victory in the 2023 Kelantan state election can be explained as a one-off situation, where a Bersatu representative won the race while campaigning under the PAS logo. The state election was held shortly after the 2022 general election and raised questions as to whether the "Green Wave" led voters to look for an alternative after decades of BN representation. In the 2024 by-election, voters chose to return to the BN fold, showing the limitations of identity politics even in a Malay majority constituency.

The demographic differences between Kelantan and Penang are noteworthy. Almost 95 per cent of the population in Kelantan are Malays. In stark contrast, Penang is well-known for its diverse population: nearly 41 per cent of its population are Malays, with an equal percentage being Chinese while another 10 per cent are Indian.

Nevertheless, Kelantan is frequently brought up as an example in conversations regarding the [peaceful coexistence](#) of Muslims and non-Muslims. People of different ethnic groups live peacefully there because of the high degree of communal identity such as through the use of [Kelantanese Malay language](#). More than that, some minority Chinese in Kelantan have come to [accept PAS' rule](#) in the state.

The religious and racial diversity of Penang has its own unique challenges. Due to their minority status vis-à-vis non-Malays, members of the Malay community there feel tensions more keenly, leading to their higher support for Islamist-populist leadership. This was particularly true in the 2023 state election, when [PN did well](#) with more Malay voters on the Penang mainland. The Malays in this state are hearing more calls for Muslims to "defend" [their rights](#) from the so-called Chinese-led government. Such a call would not resonate in Kelantan where the government is already led by an Islamist party.

Since PAS has controlled Kelantan for the last 34 years, Nenggiri voters might not

have sought a representative who can “protect” or “defend” Malay-Muslim rights. Instead, rural Nenggiri residents are looking forward to the social and economic [development](#) promised by BN. Other factors, such as BN’s campaign strategy or the dissatisfaction of PN voters with a Bersatu candidate who is actually a [PAS member](#) parachuted into this election, could also explain BN’s victory in Nenggiri.

These factors explain how the “Green Wave” has subsided in Nenggiri but Nenggiri does not represent all of peninsular Malaysia. Selangor, for example, is closer to Penang in terms of its mixed demography and it too saw PN make inroads in the 2023 state election. The Unity Government should not feel content with the Nenggiri result but should focus on maintaining momentum to win over more Malay support.

Comparing Nenggiri with Sungai Bakap, it appears that PN and the “Green Wave” are still alive, although they [may have peaked](#) if no changes are made to their form of identity-based politics. The majority-minority dynamic and the extent to which each side emphasises ethnic polarisation are two of many variables keeping PN attractive to Malay voters.

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