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BN's dicey situation in Johor

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By Marzuki Mohamad

Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute just released its comprehensive survey report on the political sentiment in Johor ahead of the 14th general election (GE14). The survey finds that Barisan Nasional (BN) is still favoured by most Johor voters. Overall support for BN in Johor is at 45%, followed by opposition parties PAS (28%), DAP (21%), PPBM (18%) and Amanah (14%).

However, the report revealed that the distribution of support for political parties varies according to region. BN gained the highest level of support in the east of Johor (60%), but the party recorded a lower level of support in the Iskandar region (34%) and the northwest region (40%).

Among Malay voters across Johor, 65% said they favoured BN, a significant reduction from as high as 80% in 2013. Malay support for BN also varies according to region. The party recorded the highest level of Malay support in the east of Johor (65%), but it received lower Malay support in the Iskandar region (55%) and the northwest region (56%).

Chinese voters on the other hand continued to express their dissatisfaction toward the ruling party. Only 14% of Chinese voters across Johor said they favoured BN, with only 7% in the Iskandar region, 10% in the eastern region and 11% in the northwest region. Fifty-eight percent of Indian voters across Johor however favoured BN.

Although the level of support for BN is still higher than that for the opposition parties, the numbers do not seem entirely encouraging for the ruling party. The 2003 delineation of the electoral boundaries, which turned many parliamentary seats in Johor into marginal Malay-majority seats, may pose some challenge to BN in retaining its power in Johor in the next general election.

With extremely low Chinese support and significantly reduced Malay support for BN in the Iskandar and northwest regions, where the percentage of Chinese voters in the BN-held parliamentary and state seats situated in these areas is quite significant, ranging from 32%-46% of the total voters, seats like Johor Bahru, Pulai, Tebrau, Pasir Gudang, Ayer Hitam, Simpang Renggam, Tanjung Plai, Muar, Labis, Segamat, Ledang and Sekijang are in a dicey situation. Many of these seats are also BN's marginal seats, won by the party with a narrow margin in the 2013 general election.

For the seats currently held by the opposition parties, with overwhelming Chinese dissatisfaction toward BN, DAP is most likely to retain all four Chinese-majority seats it won in the 13th general election. PKR, too, may retain Batu Pahat, the only parliamentary seat it currently holds in the state.

Pagoh, PPBM's single parliamentary seat in Johor held by its president, Muhyiddin Yassin, used to be an Umno stronghold. But Muhyiddin's departure from Umno in 2015 turned Pagoh into a PPBM stronghold in the country. Judging from the ground sentiment, Muhyiddin is most likely to retain his Pagoh seat.

With six parliamentary seats in Johor already in the opposition's bag, and 12 other parliamentary seats in dicey situations, BN will face tough fights in 18 out of 26 parliamentary seats in the state. If Pakatan Harapan (PH) manages to push Malay support to slightly more than 35% in three-cornered contests in these seats, at least 16 of them will fall to the opposition. And the possibility is not too far-fetched.

The picture is not too rosy for BN. As Johor has always been considered BN's stronghold, the uncertainty there does not augur well for BN in other states, either. If Johor can fall to the opposition, the other states will crumble.

BN's only lifeline is PAS. PAS will be the dark horse in GE14. By standing alone, it is unlikely that the party will win any parliamentary or state seat in Johor. Instead, it will hold back a certain percentage of the Malay votes from PH, and deliver the victory to Umno.

But as the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute survey shows, PAS' relative strength is mainly confined to the east of Johor, where Umno is also strong. Like Umno, its support level is lower in the other two regions.

Therefore, PAS' role to split the Malay votes and deliver victory to Umno will mostly be effective in parliamentary seats like Penggerang, Mersing, Tenggara, Kota Tinggi and possibly Semberong, and the 10 state seats in these areas. But these seats are also Umno's stronghold. Even without PAS, Umno will most likely win these seats.

The parliamentary and state seats in the Iskandar and the northwest regions, where the support for both Umno and PAS is lower, will be the real election battle ground in Johor. The voters' sentiment and the electoral outcome of the seats in these two regions will determine the electoral outcome in Johor. So far, the situation is quite dicey for BN in the state.

Beyond the impending electoral contest, there is another side to BN's dicey situation. As the current relatively low level of Malay support for Umno in Johor is unprecedented, the present situation may point to a new reconfiguration in Malay politics, which has been unfolding for quite some time.

Back in 1990, Umno faced one of its toughest general elections, following the 1987 Umno split as a result of the Razaleigh-Mahathir fallout in the party election that year. The birth of Semangat 46, led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Umno Baru, led by Dr Mahathir Mohamad, split Umno right down the middle. The split could be seen right from the top down to the branch level, with Umno members taking sides either with Mahathir or Razaleigh.

Despite the internal split in Umno, Malay support for the party at that time remained intact. It was the young Muhyiddin as the then menteri besar of Johor who initiated the Himpunan Melayu Johor to rally Malay support for Umno and rebuild the party in its own home ground state.

So, facing a dicey situation like this is not new to Umno in Johor. As a result of Umno's ability to retain Malay support, BN won 32 out of 36 Johor state seats in the 1990 general election. Semangat 46 won only one state seat.

This time round, Umno remains intact as a party, but it has suffered a significant loss of Malay support, not to mention miserably low Chinese support. Unlike the 1987 Umno split, the Umno crisis in 2015, which saw the Umno president for 22 years, Mahathir, leaving the party, and deputy president Muhyiddin, vice-president Shafie Apdal and Kedah state liaison chief Mukhriz Mahathir, sacked from the party, was not seen by the Malays as just an internal schism among the party elites.

Instead, it relates to deeper failure of Umno to address its perennial problem that puts its own legitimacy into question. It is about the Malays' growing intolerance towards government excessiveness, repression and corruption that has been unfolding over the past few decades, and which Najib Razak himself attempted to respond to through his well-known transformation "projects", namely the Government Transformation Programme (GTP), the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) and the short-lived Political Transformation Programme (PTP).

This new consciousness of the Malays, especially the young Malays of the 1998 Reformasi, and the generations after them, is reconfiguring Malay politics. They are mostly detached from the Umno patronage network, and more independent in their thinking and outlook. To these Malays, the 1MDB financial scandal and Umno's reaction to it point to Umno's total failure to live up to their expectations.

The massive 1MDB financial scandal and a host of other issues relating to the rising cost of living, felt by the people across races, seem to hold back these new Malays' support for Umno. As a result, while Umno leaders who prefer to keep their positions in the party and the government remain in the party, and manage to prevent their supporters from leaving, often by dishing out "goodies" through their access to Umno's extensive patronage network, hence keeping Umno intact, they still fail to rally broad-based Malay support for the party.

GE14 will be keenly contested by all political parties. As Malay votes will be split in three-cornered contests between BN, PAS and PH, the outcome in the contest for Malay votes will be crucial to determining the victor.

It seems that the electoral outcome will most likely depend on the extent to which the new Malays and the new reconfiguration in Malay politics tilt the balance, either in the favour of BN or the opposition.

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