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Pas-Umno may win the Malay vote, and still lose Selangor

Why a Bersatu-PH alliance could matter even if many of Bersatu's voters remain with Pas.



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By SYAZA SHUKRI

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Bersatu does not have to out-Malay Pas-Umno, it only needs to prevent them from monopolising the vote. Pas president Tan Sri Abdul Hadi Awang and Bersatu president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin during better times united under Perikatan Nasional. (FILE PIX)

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MALAYSIAN politics has a remarkable ability to turn yesterday's absurdity into today's possibility.

After two Bersatu state assemblymen decided to support Barisan Nasional's Menteri Besar in Pahang (despite Bersatu having built much of its political identity as the antithesis of Umno) there is now talk of Bersatu assemblymen doing something similar in Selangor by backing Menteri Besar Amirudin Shari. At this point, what is one more unlikely alliance?



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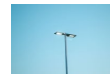
Before anyone comes for me, no, this is not an argument for Pakatan Harapan to welcome Bersatu back with open arms, nor have I forgotten the small matter of the Sheraton Move. Pakatan Harapan (PH) supporters would be entirely entitled to see more than a little irony in the party that helped bring down the first PH government potentially finding its way back into its orbit.

But that is precisely what makes it an interesting academic exercise: could Bersatu actually help PH shore up its Malay support in Selangor?

Imagine the new battle lines. Pas and Umno potentially on one side while Bersatu finds itself on the other with PH. Suddenly PH would have not one, but two explicitly Malay-Muslim parties in Amanah and Bersatu. The arithmetic looks promising.



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In the 2023 Selangor state election, Bersatu won 12 seats and Amanah five. Pas won ten and Umno only two. That gives 17 seats for Amanah-Bersatu against 12 for Pas-Umno.

Unfortunately, elections are not Excel spreadsheets.

Firstly, Bersatu does not necessarily own the voters who elected its candidates in 2023. Its 12 assemblymen were elected under the Perikatan Nasional (PN) banner when PN had positioned itself as the principal Malay alternative to both PH and BN.

Many voters who marked the PN box were likely voting for the larger political proposition PN represented i.e. an emphasis on Islam and Malay-Muslim politics. And Pas was central to that proposition.

That distinction matters enormously

now that Pas and Bersatu are on opposing sides, as re-confirmed again by Tan Sri Abdul Hadi Awang himself.

Recent elections offer another uncomfortable warning for Bersatu. Its abysmal performances in Johor and Negeri Sembilan suggest that the Bersatu label may not be particularly formidable once separated from PN.

Selangor is, of course, a different electoral terrain, and an alliance with PH would provide an entirely different coalition ecosystem.

But that is precisely the point: Bersatu's electoral value may depend considerably on the company it keeps. Being with PH would not automatically transform it into a Malay vote magnet any more than being outside PN guarantees that its voters will follow.

We therefore cannot simply take Bersatu's 2023 votes, drag them from the PN column into the PH column and press "recalculate". Some voters may follow Bersatu. Others may stay with Pas. Some voted for individual candidates; others were simply voting against PH or Umno. The important question, then, is how many voters would actually follow Bersatu to a new home.

Regardless, Bersatu's 2023 performance should not be dismissed. Of its 12 victories, six came against Umno candidates, five against PKR and one against Amanah.

Half of Bersatu's wins, in other words, came at Umno's expense. That should give pause to anyone assuming Pas can simply replace Bersatu with Umno and emerge stronger in Selangor.

Umno remains a major national party with deep grassroots networks and historical loyalties, but Selangor has not been particularly kind to it.

In 2023, Umno contested 12 state seats and won only two. Pas-Umno, therefore, is not automatically an electoral super-combination in Selangor.

But neither is Amanah-Bersatu. If the next Selangor election becomes a straightforward contest over who best represents the Malays, my money would still be on Pas-Umno.

Pas has growing grassroots support and formidable machinery in the state. Umno, despite its decline, retains networks and residual loyalty. More importantly, Amanah and Bersatu will struggle to out-Malay Pas and Umno.

The good news for PH is that they do

not have to. Selangor's electorate makes the politics of Malay monopoly less decisive than it would be elsewhere.

Its Malay voters are predominantly urban and suburban, operating within Malaysia's most economically developed and ethnically diverse state. They can be religiously observant and economically cosmopolitan, concerned about Malay interests while comfortable with ethnic diversity, conservative on some questions and thoroughly pragmatic on others.

Political scientists like myself like categories. Voters, on the other hand, have an annoying tendency not to cooperate. This is why the much-used term "moderate Malay" needs some unpacking.

PH does not need Malays who are somehow less Malay or less Muslim. It needs Malay politicians who can articulate Malay and Islamic concerns without making everyone else wonder whether their place in the state is conditional. That is potentially the political space for Amanah-Bersatu (and maybe PKR and Bersama).

Their objective should not be to defeat Pas-Umno for majority control of the Malay vote. It should be to prevent any party from monopolising it.

Suppose Pas-Umno wins a clear majority of Malay voters. Politically, that would be significant. Electorally, however, it does not automatically deliver Selangor.

PH retains a substantial advantage among non-Malay voters (not considering, for now, the potential challenge from Bersama). In mixed and moderately Malay-majority constituencies, it therefore needs enough Malay support to combine with its Chinese and Indian base to cross the finishing line.

This produces the real paradox. Pas-Umno could win the Malay vote and lose Selangor. Amanah-Bersatu could lose the Malay vote and help PH retain it.

That is why adding Bersatu to PH does not magically solve its Malay problem. Bersatu may discover that some (or most) of its voters prefer Pas when forced to choose. But it does not need to bring all of them.

At the very least, an Amanah-Bersatu combination could give non-Pas Malay voters a clearer political home, consolidating a segment of the Malay electorate that might otherwise be fragmented between PH, BN, Bersatu and potentially other alternatives.

In Selangor, where PH does not necessarily need to win the Malay vote outright, even that consolidation could materially improve its chances.

An Amanah-Bersatu partnership would therefore succeed not by out-Malay-ing Pas-Umno, but by offering an alternative Malay-Muslim political presence. Perhaps that will be enough. Perhaps it will not.

Syaza Shukri, PhD, is an associate professor and the current Head at the Department of Political Science, IIUM. The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of Sinar Daily.

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