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The Galas and Batu Sapi By-Elections: New Trend or Flash in the Pan?

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Synopsis

In the recent Malaysian by-elections, wins for the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition in Galas and Batu Sapi have led to views that there is a definite electoral swing towards the BN. Yet a closer look would indicate that it is premature to extrapolate trends from the results of the two by-elections.

Commentary

GALAS AND Batu Sapi, the sleepy towns in Kelantan and Sabah respectively, have been the focus of Malaysian politics in recent weeks. The by-elections there on 4 November 2010 (after the deaths of the incumbents) saw the Barisan Nasional's (BN) victory in both constituencies. These have created an impression that there is now a "blue wave" (the colour of the BN flag) in Malaysia politics --, a definitive swing back towards the BN. However, it may be a mistake to see the outcome in Galas and Batu Sapi as reflecting voting trends in the next general election which is likely to be around the corner. At most, the results may only reflect voting behaviour in similar rural and relatively poorer constituencies.

Galas

BN fielded a local UMNO figure in Galas. Both UMNO and the opposition Islamist party PAS focused on local rather than national issues. The BN secured a majority of 1,190 votes. This is larger when compared to PAS' victory margin of 646 votes in 2008. But the swing to the BN needs to be balanced against the fact that Galas was actually a BN stronghold, even if it is located in the PAS-controlled Kelantan state. PAS has won in Galas only twice; in 1959 and nearly 50 years later in 2008. According to some analysts, the details of the voting in Galas reveal that it was the Orang Asli vote that was mainly responsible for BN's impressive majority. While the Malay and the Chinese vote for the BN increased by 7% and 3% respectively, the Orang Asli vote increased by 14%, with the BN capturing 78% of the Orang Asli vote in tandem with a large increase in voter turnout for the Orang Asli. In the campaigning the BN had played up the problems of the Orang Asli.

While the increase in the Malay vote does suggest that the BN is capturing more Malay support, too much cannot be made of it. According to PAS, the vote for the party stayed almost constant with a decrease of only 265 votes compared to 2008, which suggests that there was not a significant loss of resident Malay support for PAS in Galas. The increase in the Chinese vote for the BN came as a surprise to many. The BN used Prime Minister Najib Razak's 1Malaysia slogan in their campaigning with the Chinese in Galas; this may have had a positive impact on Chinese voters. However, the shift in the Chinese vote was small and considering how differently the Chinese in Batu Sapi voted, it cannot be taken as indicative of a new trend nationally. Overall, the

pivotal role of the Orang Asli in the voting makes the Galas election quite unique. The involvement of UMNO strongman Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah in the by-election campaign for BN was also an important factor in the BN victory, given that he commands much respect in Galas and in Kelantan as a whole.

Batu Sapi

The BN's performance was even more impressive in the parliamentary constituency of Batu Sapi in Sabah. It secured a majority of 6,359 votes in a three-cornered fight against the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and the Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP). Given the divided opposition it faced, the BN was expected to win in Batu Sapi. It easily captured 80% of the Muslim/Bumiputra vote, an increase of about 15 %. The PKR had fielded a Muslim candidate with the aim of challenging the BN's hold over the Muslim vote. But in playing up the "social justice" agenda, the party struck a more sympathetic chord with the Chinese than with the Muslims. The SAPP was expected to pose a stiffer challenge to the BN since it is a Sabahan party and fielded a strong candidate, Yong Teck Lee, the party President and a former Chief Minister of Sabah. As in Galas, the campaigning was also on local bread-and-butter issues.

The surprise in the Batu Sapi election result was that the PKR, a relatively new party with a weak election machinery, did better than the well-established SAPP. Moreover, the PKR did better than the SAPP in Chinese majority areas. The outcome is an encouraging sign for PKR as segments of East Malaysian voters shifted their attention towards the Peninsula-based party. The other interesting development in Batu Sapi was the decline in the Chinese vote for the BN by about 5%, in contrast to Galas. Counted together, the two opposition parties won the majority of the Chinese votes in the Chinese majority areas.

Broader implications

BN's win in Galas will have no effect on Kelantan politics as it merely translates into the BN holding one more seat (6 instead of 5) of the 45 state seats in the Kelantan state assembly. The win also reaffirmed Tengku Razaleigh's clout as a veteran and competent politician. As for Batu Sapi, the poor performance of the opposition might just nudge PKR and SAPP to be more serious about collaboration. Their total votes amount to just over half of what BN garnered -- a huge lag that can hardly be tackled by fighting the BN separately.

One other factor in BN's victory that will be significant in the coming general election is the importance of party machinery and funds for winning elections in rural and semi-rural constituencies. It comes as no surprise that BN's well-heeled election machine managed to reach more areas and more voters than the opposition parties could both in Galas and Batu Sapi. BN's triumph in the two by-elections has definitely boosted morale in the BN parties, increasing the likelihood of an early general election.

However, Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin has warned his party that it is not yet time to celebrate. He may be right as the by-elections are not clearly indicative of a "blue wave" sweeping the country. The BN may have to work the ground even harder before calling for a general election.

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