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An UMNO Triumphant or Insecure for GE15?

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SYNOPSIS

UMNO may seek an early general election to capitalise on the Opposition's disunity and disarray, and to mitigate its own challenges in recovering popular support and addressing salient issues that had led to its defeat in 2018.

COMMENTARY

IF the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) seeks an early general election (GE), it would be more out of its weaknesses than strengths.

UMNO has led its coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) to two landslide victories, in Johor last weekend, and Melaka in November 2021. BN won 40 seats out of 56 in Johor, and 21 seats out of 28 in Melaka. This follows Sarawak's state election last December, where UMNO's long-time partners under the Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) gained 76 seats out of 82.

The wind seems to be in UMNO's sails. Party president Zahid Hamidi and former party president and ex-Prime Minister Najib Razak have been pressing for an early GE, although parliament is due for dissolution only in July 2023. In fact, UMNO is not out of the woods yet after its serious drubbing in the 2018 GE.

Malay Support

First, it has not recovered the Malay support it had lost after 2013. Bersatu and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), members of the newest coalition, Perikatan Nasional (PN),

have been gaining support among Malay voters that traditionally supported UMNO, including rural voters and public servants.

In Johor, UMNO's vote share for the seats (largely Malay-majority constituencies) it contested in only improved slightly from 43.9% (2018) to 46.7% (2022), far from the 62.3% in the 2013 GE (see [Table](#)). While UMNO improved its seat count from 17 (2018) to 33 (2022), it could not arrest the decline in support since 2013 in nine seats.

In Melaka, PN's two-seat score obscures their strength. In 2018, PAS failed to win any state seat. In 2021, PAS missed winning the Serkam seat by 79 votes. PAS fared better than Pakatan Harapan (PH) in all the rural and semi-rural seats it contested, particularly Serkam and Taboh Naning. This is significant as PAS is known as a regional party with its grassroots bastions concentrated in Kelantan, Kedah and Terengganu.

Bersatu's eyebrow-raising victory in Melaka's Sungai Udang, an UMNO stronghold, with a significant proportion of military personnel and their families, reflects its attraction for Malay public servants.

Bersatu's potential as a game-changer is seen in the Malay-majority seat of Bemban of Melaka, which was traditionally held by the BN's Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) but was lost to PH's Democratic Action Party (DAP) in 2018. Bersatu boldly fielded a Malay candidate and won. It banked in the Malay votes (traditionally UMNO/BN supporters) and capitalised on the splitting of Chinese votes between DAP and MCA. Bersatu can pick up more seats by strategically deploying Malay candidates in such rural and semi-rural areas.

UMNO/BN's supermajorities in Johor and Melaka, both UMNO strongholds, obscure the grounds gained by PN. Among the 37 seats contested by UMNO in Johor, PAS and Bersatu worked together strategically to become the best performing Opposition coalition in 25 seats, although winning just 3 of those. PAS gave way to Bersatu in contesting fewer seats this year than in 2018, improving their performance in all but one seat. Bersatu's and PAS' combined voter share was 60% of UMNO's.

If the votes of PN and PH were combined, they would have won 19 more seats together. If Opposition parties avoid multi-cornered fights in a GE, they could present UMNO with a much tougher challenge. Not all votes are transferable between PN and PH, but it is plausible that some of their anti-UMNO/BN supporters would vote strategically in a high-stakes GE.

Stability Elusive

Second, because UMNO enjoyed majority Malay support, it sustained political stability for decades. It has since been a destabilising force after it lost power in 2018. UMNO

destroyed the PH government by working with defectors from Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Bersatu, and PAS, to form the PN government in 2020. UMNO leaders brought down the PN government in 2021 but were forced to compromise with PN to accept PN's preferred choice, UMNO Vice President Ismail Sabri Yaakob, as prime minister.

Because the UMNO president is not also the PM, as is customary, power is diffuse and factionalism exacerbated. UMNO leaders unhappy with the PM and the status quo have continued to agitate for a change of government, such as triggering the election in Johor.

There, they had persuaded voters that if UMNO were returned with a larger majority, it would restore the political stability that has been so elusive for Malaysians, that only UMNO can provide – the same claim they are making for an early GE.

Yet, two days after UMNO's triumphant win in Johor, UMNO's candidate for Chief Minister (Menteri Besar), Hasni Mohammad, who had won the mandate from voters, made way for Onn Hafiz Ghazi, the son of Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein's sister. Onn Hafiz was [reportedly](#) the preferred candidate of the Johor palace.

If UMNO remains vulnerable to volatile intra-party manoeuvres serving personal interests, voters may conclude that it is not the stabilising force that deserves support. Without majority support among Malays, UMNO may increasingly not have the final say on key matters of state, having to contend with the rising influence of political rivals and other power bases such as the Malay rulers, civil servants, and East Malaysian political elites.

Former PM Najib Razak and 1MDB

Third, at the heart of UMNO's disunity and uncertainty is a difference of views and interests on the role of Zahid and Najib, and the future of the party. Both men have been nettled by court cases for graft. But they command the loyalty of many division chiefs that they have patronised over their long careers. The party continues to find it hard to draw a line under the 1MDB scandal and take a more confident position on corruption – important issues that contributed to UMNO's defeat in 2018.

Buoyed by enthusiastic or curious public reception during the Johor campaign, Najib had [suggested](#) that the people missed him as the prime minister.

UMNO members appreciate Najib's star quality and ability to pull in crowds, but they do not appear unanimous in wanting him to make a political comeback as party president and prime minister. He may be popular in UMNO, but analysts question if he could win majority support from ordinary voters, including Malays.

At issue now is when the GE should be called. Zahid and Najib likely wish to maximise their power over the party and the next government by exercising control over the election campaign and candidates. If the GE is not held soon and before the party election due by this December, the Zahid-Najib group may not retain the presidency and may need to compromise and support a new president such as UMNO Deputy President Mat Hasan, current PM Ismail Sabri, Hishammuddin, or Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin.

Ismail and his colleagues in government apparently prefer a later GE, but even if they agree to call for early dissolution of parliament, the assent of the King (Agong) would be necessary and should not be taken for granted. These issues are coming to a head at the ongoing UMNO General Assembly (UMNO GA).

Intense Politicking, Weak Governance

Fourth, UMNO has played a shrewd political game to regain power but this has also distracted it from a serious reckoning on why the party lost in 2018 and the necessary moves to attract support among current and new voters.

Political machinations have disrupted national governance, leading to public dissatisfaction with the government's handling of COVID-19, economic recovery, and disastrous flooding. UMNO Vice President Mahdzir Khalid has called for more focus on these issues of concern for voters while UMNO Youth has urged reforms on corruption and other issues resonant with the youth at this UMNO GA, but these are unlikely to be taken seriously for now.

For the next GE, the electorate will see an influx of [5.8 million new voters](#), a [40% increase](#) from 2018's voter population. Voting trends suggest that voters are open to supporting new coalitions like PN and alternative parties like MUDA led by younger political aspirants.

It may well be sufficient for UMNO to promise stability and a return to "the good old days" to scrape through the next GE, especially if turnout remains low as in Melaka and Johor. If UMNO/BN does not win outright, it would have to work out tactical agreements with one or two other parties.

Conclusion

Low turnout may reflect voter apathy and broad discontent, which may quickly be galvanised by the Opposition. Given Malaysia's personality-based politics, UMNO needs to present a stronger united front and a clear candidate for PM to rally the public.

Bersatu president Muhyiddin Yassin has resonated with some Malay voters by distinguishing Bersatu as the true defender of the Malay values of integrity and strong

leadership, and [claiming](#) that convicted UMNO leaders have no sense of shame. The Chinese may have sat out the recent state elections out of pique at PH, but are unlikely to back BN. Some would sooner vote for Muhyiddin and PN, than BN, due to their deep-seated antipathy towards UMNO.

Given that much of the Opposition is in disunity and disarray, and since UMNO does not seem prepared to address its weaknesses, it may indeed be opportune for UMNO to seek a snap GE.

Table: Vote share* of Johor state seats contested by UMNO in 2013, 2018 and 2022

		2013		2018		2022	
		UMNO	Opposition	UMNO	Opposition	UMNO	Opposition
1	Buloh Kasap	60.9%	PAS 39.1%	52.5%	Bersatu 47.5%	57.0%	PKR 22.8% Bersatu 19.1% Pejuang 1.2%
2	Kemelah	56.4%	PKR 43.6%	43.9%	Amanah 56.1%	41.1%	Amanah 32.3% PAS 25.4% Pejuang 1.2%
3	Tenang	55.6%	PAS 44.4%	43.8%	Bersatu 50.9% PAS 5.3%	44.9%	MUDA 30.4% Bersatu 22.8% Pejuang 1.9%
4	Bukit Kepong	Electoral Constituency did not exist		43.6%	Bersatu 49% PAS 7.4%	41.1%	Bersatu 44.3% MUDA 13.8% Pejuang 0.9%
5	Bukit Pasir	Electoral Constituency did not exist		44.7%	PAS 55.3%	32.1%	PAS 31.1% Amanah 24.8% Independents 11.0% Pejuang 1.0%
6	Serom	55.4%	PAS 44.6%	39.5%	Amanah 49.2% PAS 11.3%	38.4%	PAS 35.2% Amanah 24.9% Pejuang 1.5%
7	Simpang Jeram	Electoral Constituency did not exist		29.3%	Amanah 61.6% PAS 9% Independent 0.1%	30.1%	Amanah 39.9% PAS 29.0% Pejuang 0.9%
8	Bukit Naning	53.3%	PKR 42.5% Independent 4.1%	38.1%	PKR 48.4% PAS 11.1% Independent 2.4%	38.1%	Bersatu 27.4% PKR 23.3% Independents 10.6% Pejuang 0.6%

9	Maharani	43.0%	PAS 57%	29.3%	Amanah 53.9% PAS 16.8%	27.9%	PAS 36.0% Amanah 31.0% Independents 2.8% Pejuang 1.4%
10	Sungai Balang	54.6%	PAS 45.4%	42.2%	PKR 41.3% PAS 16.5%	45.6%	Bersatu 33.0% PKR 19.6% Pejuang 1.8%
11	Semerah	55.1%	PKR 44.9%	42.5%	PKR 42.8% PAS 14.6%	44.9%	Bersatu 30.5% PKR 22.4% Pejuang 1.3%
12	Sri Medan	70.8%	PAS 29.2%	56.9%	Bersatu 27.2% PAS 15.9%	60.5%	PAS 31.7% PKR 7.1% Pejuang 0.7%
13	Semarang	72.6%	PAS 27.4%	59.5%	Bersatu 27.1% PAS 13.4%	61.9%	Bersatu 29.4% PKR 7.4% Pejuang 1.3%
14	Parit Raja	61.2%	PAS 38.8%	44.3%	Bersatu 41.3% PAS 14.4%	49.6%	Bersatu 29.9% MUDA 18.1% Pejuang 2.4%
15	Senggarang	55.0%	PAS 45.0%	42.4%	Amanah 45.9% PAS 11.7%	45.1%	Amanah 27.0% PAS 26.1% Independents 1.1% Pejuang 0.8%
16	Rengit	66.9%	PAS 33.1%	55.3%	PKR 31.4% PAS 13.3%	48.9%	Bersatu 37.0% PKR 12.8% Pejuang 1.3%
17	Machap	60.2%	PAS 39.8%	46.9%	Bersatu 44.9% PAS 8.2%	56.6%	PAS 23.0% MUDA 17.9% Pejuang 2.4%
18	Layang- layang	58.6%	PKR 40.4%	51.3%	PKR 44.6% PAS 8.4%	55.0%	PKR 34.5% Bersatu 9.3% Pejuang 1.2%

19	Mahkota	51.5%	PAS 41.4%	44.1%	Amanah 48.2% PAS 7.6%	45.9%	Amanah 31.6% Bersatu 21.0% Warisan 1.5%
20	Endau	60.2%	PAS 39.8%	48.0%	Bersatu 27.3% PAS 24.8%	35.5%	Bersatu 55.5% Amanah 7.6% Pejuang 1.0%
21	Panti	81.6%	PAS 13.3% PKR 5%	53.2%	Bersatu 37.2% PAS 9.6%	57.3%	Bersatu 30.7% Amanah 10.5% Pejuang 1.5%
22	Pasir Raja	67.4%	PAS 32.6%	51.6%	Amanah 39.8% PAS 8.7%	58.2%	Bersatu 27.9% PKR 12.3% Pejuang 1.6%
23	Sedili	91.8%	PKR 8.2%	76.0%	PKR 24.0%	63.5%	Bersatu 33.6% Amanah 1.8% Pejuang 1.1%
24	Johor Lama	74.2%	PAS 25.8%	60.6%	PKR 32.5% PAS 6.9%	60.6%	Bersatu 30.5% PKR 7.6% Pejuang 1.3%
25	Penawar	86.9%	PAS 13.1%	70.4%	Amanah 29.6%	67.0%	Bersatu 26.5% Amanah 3.7% Pejuang 2.8%
26	Tanjung Surat	80.1%	PKR 19.9%	65.4%	PKR 34.6%	67.0%	PAS 26.8% PKR 5.4%
27	Tiram	59.3%	PAS 40.7%	36.6%	PKR 52.7% PAS 10.6%	40.7%	PAS 31.3% PKR 22.2% Pejuang 2.5% Independents 1.8% PBM 1.5%
28	Permas	56.8%	PAS 42.4%	37.7%	Bersatu 54.2% PAS 7.9%	41.9%	Bersatu 27.8% Amanah 25.9%

					Independent 0.2%		Warisan 2.5% Pejuang 1.8%
29	Larkin	Electoral Constituency did not exist		36.8%	Bersatu 56.0% PAS 7.2%	41.8%	Bersatu 25.7% PKR 16.8% MUDA 12.9% Pejuang 2.1% Independents 0.8%
30	Kempas	55.9%	PAS 44.1%	33.8%	Bersatu 59.7% PAS 6.6%	38.9%	PKR 27.4% Bersatu 26.2% Pejuang 4.4% Independents 3.0%
31	Kota Iskandar	Electoral Constituency did not exist		33.0%	Amanah 58.4% PAS 8.7%	40.8%	Amanah 33.1% Bersatu 22.0% Pejuang 2.3% PSM 1.8%
32	Bukit Permai	58.8%	PAS 41.2%	40.6%	Bersatu 52.7% PAS 6.7%	48.4%	MUDA 27.2% Bersatu 22.7% Pejuang 1.7%
33	Benut	68.1%	PAS 31.9%	55.4%	Bersatu 29.4% PAS 15.1%	63.1%	Bersatu 29.2% PKR 6.9% Pejuang 0.8%
34	Kukup	71.2%	PAS 28.8%	49.6%	Amanah 45.8% PAS 4.6%	60.4%	Bersatu 17.8% PKR 17.0% Pejuang 4.8%
35	Parit Yaani	(MCA contested)	PAS 52.8%	(MCA contested)	Amanah 54.2% PAS 12.9%	38.6%	Amanah 37.3% PAS 23.1% Pejuang 1.0%
36	Pemanis	(Gerakan contested)	PAS 46.6%	(Gerakan contested)	PKR 45.1% PAS 11.7%	50.3%	PKR 26.0% Bersatu 22.2%

							Pejuang 1.4%
37	Gambir	(MIC contested)	PAS 46.1% Independent 6.0%	(MIC contested)	Bersatu 53.3% PAS 9.4%	45.5%	Bersatu 27.5% PKR 25.8% Pejuang 1.3%
38	Puteri Wangsa	(MIC contested)	PAS 53.3% Independent 2.5%	43.9%	Bersatu 61.1% PAS 6.5% Independent 1.6%	(MCA contested)	MUDA 43.2% Gerakan 16.9% Pejuang 4.7% PBM 4.7% Independent 0.8%
	TOTAL	62.3%		43.9%		46.7%	

*Vote shares are derived from comparing votes received by each party against total valid votes cast in each seat.

Data compilation and analysis by: Research Analyst Nadiah Isa and Senior Analyst Nawaljeet Singh Rayar, RSIS Malaysia Programme

Sources: 2013 data - <https://undi.info/>. 2018 & 2022 data - <https://dashboard.spr.gov.my/#!/home>.

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