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Malaysia's 15th General Election: Malay-Muslim Voting Trends and the Rise of PAS

By Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid and Che Hamdan Che Mohd Razali

SYNOPSIS

The emergence of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) as the largest party in the Malaysian parliament following the recent GE15 was the result of greatly increased voter support from the Malay-Muslim community. What accounted for this swing in voter support for PAS and, by extension, Perikatan Nasional (PN)?

COMMENTARY

The unexpectedly strong showing by Perikatan Nasional (PN) – the alliance comprising Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), Malaysian United Indigenous Party (PPBM aka Bersatu) and the multi-racial Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (GERAKAN) – to emerge as the largest coalition supported by Malay-Muslim voters, stands out as one of the highlights of Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15) on 19 November 2022.

On the back of 30 per cent of popular votes, PN's 73 seats, of which PAS was its single largest contributor, almost delivered it the reins of government. This prompted comments over social media that painted a gloomy picture of Malaysia descending into a Taliban-like polity spearheaded by a PAS-led 'green wave.' So what caused the massive transfers of Malay-Muslim loyalty from the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) – the largest component party of Barisan Nasional (BN), Malaysia's long-standing ruling coalition – to its PN rivals? Likewise, why did the Malay-Muslim voters choose PN over PH?

Malay-Muslim Loyalty Switches from UMNO to PN

One reason for the Malay-Muslim defection from UMNO to PN had to do with the trust deficit UMNO had been suffering since August 2022 over its President Ahmad Zahid

Hamidi's ill-advised decision to defend Najib Razak despite the latter's imprisonment for embezzling funds related to SRC International, a former unit of 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB). As much as Malay-Muslims were thankful for Najib's large spending in rural areas, gratitude did not extend to condonation of corruption that had been confirmed by the nation's highest court.

Malay-Muslims were also aware of criticisms levelled against them for earlier voting in UMNO state governments in Melaka and Johor despite their leaders being on trial in several corruption cases.

Furthermore, rightly or not, PAS and PPBM politicians had presented clean images of themselves when it came to graft. Muhyiddin Yassin's emphatic anti-corruption stance was arguably what differentiated PPBM from UMNO even if both parties carried the Malay-centric DNA and development agenda.

The Malay-Muslim Preference for PN over PH

Malay-Muslims chose PN over PH because of the latter's weakness on the Malay ground and the misleading picture of an allegedly Democratic Action Party (DAP)-dominated PH.

In this respect, propaganda effectively disseminated through social media, especially through Tik Tok, created the impression that PH would not do enough to defend Malay privileges, then seen as being under threat.

Misunderstandings about PH's economic policies that purportedly disadvantaged the Malays during its 22-month rule, such as the reduction in subsidies affecting fishermen and rubber smallholders, and insensitive remarks by DAP figures regarding Islam, the Malay language and the Malay royalty became the staple diet of PN campaigning.

A lot of the rumours appeared to be inaccurate, such as the alleged restrictions on the call to prayer by mosques in DAP-led Penang, but their constant pedalling did much to sway rural and even semi-urban Malay folks who had become overly reliant on social media as their source of news. PN Chairman Muhyiddin Yassin himself landed in hot soup during the final stages of campaigning when he linked PH to a purported overseas-directed plot to Christianise Malays. More than a week after GE15, accusations of Anwar Ibrahim being an Israeli agent was still being spread by PN figures, leading to police reports being lodged against them.

PH was also hampered by the religion- and race-baiting tactics of PAS extremists. For example, PAS Youth chief in Sik, Kedah, Mohd Shahiful Mohd Nasir, proclaimed that those who voted for BN and PH would, in fact, be booking a place in Hell. An actor, Zul Huzaimy, speaking on PAS' campaign trail, declared his intention to slaughter warlike non-Muslims (kafir harbi) who opposed the implementation of Islamic rule.

While PAS' central leaders disowned both statements, the damage from the inflammatory remarks would have been done by the time the extremists had rescinded their remarks or been dissociated from the party.

There was also the problem of creeping extremism as PAS members and

sympathisers were found in the large Islamic bureaucracy at both federal and state levels of administration. Hence, Friday sermons held in mosques during the campaigning period, while not overtly supporting any political party, openly exhorted Malay-Muslims to elect political representatives who would unquestioningly defend Islam, thus automatically excluding PH's and BN's non-Muslim candidates from consideration.

Crucially, at the federal level, PAS' position as a member of the ruling coalition (March 2020-November 2022) had significant impact in whitewashing its hitherto extremist image previously implanted in Malay-Muslim minds via the BN-controlled official media. Under UMNO Vice President Ismail Sabri Yaakob's government (August 2021-November 2022), both the Minister and Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department were PAS top brass leaders, namely party Vice President Senator Idris Ahmad, and Member of Parliament for Pengkalan Chepa in Kelantan, Ahmad Marzuk Shaary.

Such political clout made available by virtue of their official posts enabled PAS leaders to speak on government platforms, which could not be matched by religious spokesmen in UMNO and in PAS' splinter party, PH's National Trust Party (AMANAH), many of whose Islamic figures were soundly defeated in GE15 despite possessing incumbency advantages. Mujahid Yusof Rawa (AMANAH) and Fuziah Salleh (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, or PKR, led by Anwar Ibrahim), former Minister and Deputy Minister of Islamic Affairs respectively during PH's first administration, were beaten by PN candidates in their previously held constituencies respectively of Parit Buntar in Perak and Kuantan in Pahang.

PN Aided by Automatic Voter Registration and UNDI18

PN, particularly PAS, became the primary beneficiary of the new policies on Automatic Voter Registration and UNDI18 (Vote18), which lowered the voting age to 18. Despite the new franchise maturity for under-18 citizens, their lack of political maturity, as gauged from the lack of political education in Malaysia's secondary schooling system, meant that parents' conservatism and even extremism were often passed down to offsprings, many of whom lived in their childhood homes until they got married.

Adding to this the fact that religiously-oriented Malay households normally raised large families, the stage was set for an exponential rise in Malay-Muslim support for PN by virtue of the six million new voters suddenly enfranchised, ironically as a result of PH's democratising initiatives during its first stint in power.

In rural, and even in pockets of urban areas heavily populated by Malay-Muslims, PAS members and sympathisers run an elaborate network of Islamic schools from the kindergarten to upper secondary levels. While active cohorts of these student populations will provide the source for future PAS leaders, those without any political affiliation are very likely to vote for PAS owing to peer and parental influence.

In summary, the steep rise in Malay-Muslim support for PAS, and by extension PN, in GE15 can be attributed to the community's increasing confidence in PAS as a staunch protector of Malay-Muslim rights, its disappointment with UMNO which showed no remorse over corruption cases tainting its leaders, and to systemic factors that helped

it – with its vast grassroots networks in densely populated Malay-Muslim areas – to assert its credentials as the legitimate spokesman for Islam in the generally Malay-centric PN coalition.

Despite BN's inclusion as a component member of Anwar Ibrahim's unity government, regaining Malay-Muslim trust remains a tall order for UMNO, whose continual engagement with federal affairs in Putrajaya and pre-occupation with upcoming party elections may simply disconnect them further from their traditional grassroots voters.

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