



# Challenges Facing Malay Rural Youth in Kelantan

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## **Challenges Facing Malay Rural Youth in Kelantan**

*By Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Kelantan's rural Malay youth face multiple socio-economic challenges. PAS' long rule rests on identity-based trust, diaspora support and missteps of the federal government. Today, digital media and migration from rural areas to the cities are challenging traditional structures, opening up space for a viable political alternative to PAS.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Malays are traditionally deemed to be rural folk. But this is no longer true. By 2016, 68 per cent of Malaysia's Bumiputeras lived in urban areas, due to two factors: migration from rural areas to the cities and urban expansion.

While there are commonalities among the youth, those who do not migrate may hold unique views that differentiate them from those who do move or who grew up in cities.

Kelantan makes for a useful case study, with the highest proportion of rural population on the Peninsula, at 55.9 per cent as of 2020. It is also the most loyal to the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), except for a period from 1977 to 1990.

### **Demographic and Socioeconomic Reality**

Kelantan experiences high rates of poverty and youth emigration. Economic activity in Kelantan is largely small-scale artisanal trade, agriculture, and the informal sectors. Historically, the Kelantanese were known for their expertise in opening up land schemes across the Peninsula. Among Malays, they were dominant throughout the country, from selling on the streets to dominating corporate boardrooms.

However, today there is a persistent feeling that the state is falling behind because of British colonial legacies, federal neglect during the first Mahathir era, and successive PAS state governments that do not prioritise economic development.

Much employment in the state remains informal. It is geographically located at Malaysia's land border with Thailand and maritime border with Vietnam, where illicit activities fill the economic gaps. Migration is often a necessity for young Kelantanese, who otherwise rely heavily on family support networks.

Meanwhile, Kelantan consistently ranks as the leading state for drug addiction per capita. The majority of drug users are young people. Income from drug dealing exceeds formal rural wages.

Then there is the gender gap. Kelantan, along with Sabah and Sarawak, ranks high in underage marriage. This is linked to poverty as parents prefer to marry off their daughters to reduce their socioeconomic burdens, apart from being a solution to pregnancies out of wedlock.

### **Socialisation and Identity Formation**

The vast majority of rural youths in Kelantan are socialised through mosque-centred and kinship-based networks, where exposure to ideological pluralism is relatively limited compared to their urban counterparts in the state or across the country. Social structures are more hierarchical.

Even in national schools run by the federal government, there are anecdotal reports of a growing trend of teachers, who used to be the backbone of UMNO, shifting their support to PAS and influencing their students.

With young Kelantanese having no living memory of a non-PAS state government, PAS' presence has become entrenched despite the federal government changing hands many times since 2018. Islamist rhetoric has shaped public policy, providing moral order and legitimacy. This, however, coexists with economic stagnation.

Today, this paradigm is coming under challenge from digital media. It allows greater diversity of views that bypass traditional structures, but it also exposes young people to more social ills and exploitation. This is due to inadequate sex education and an officially restrictive social life. Traditional cultural practices have come under attack. Entertainment is strictly regulated, especially that involving women performers.

Today, PAS has successfully embedded itself in Kelantanese society, whereas alternatives like Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Harapan have failed to do so. PAS is no longer as dominant as it once was – in 2023, Barisan won a few rural seats while Pakatan secured an urban seat in Kelantan. But neither party appears to take the state seriously enough. Seat allocation and candidate selection are often made at the last minute. Frequently, candidates parachuted in from Kuala Lumpur, who have not worked the ground prior, struggle to properly introduce themselves to the voters.

## Political Worldview

Support for Perikatan Nasional, the coalition led primarily by PAS and Bersatu, is largely rooted in the party's perceived credibility in protecting Malay-Muslim interests. In rural areas, this is based on trust-based relationships rather than being policy driven.

However, to reduce young rural Kelantanese to voting on identity alone risks ignoring other factors.

To say that Kelantanese youth are uncomfortable with, if not outrightly opposed to, multiracialism is also not entirely accurate. There is a familiarity with the state's Chinese, Thai and Indian minorities, who are more assimilated into the majority community compared to the West Coast of the Peninsula. But they are still saddled with broader cultural and political anxieties, including valid concerns about the impact of Chinese vernacular education on the national fabric.

Kelantan's history of demonisation as the Other and marginalisation by previous Barisan Nasional administrations led by PAS' rival, UMNO, has also led to a view that the federal government is more focused on investing in urban areas, and not the Malay Belt – predominantly Malay states on the northern and eastern coasts of the Peninsula.

While the federal government, especially from the time of PM Najib Razak through to PM Anwar Ibrahim today, has put a lot more emphasis on the state – as shown, for instance, in the East-Coast Railway Project, the expansion of the Kota Bharu Airport, and multiple flood mitigation projects – this distrust of the centre remains.

There is also the impact of the 1MDB scandal, which cemented Kelantanese antipathy towards UMNO. It is a myth that Malays are tolerant of corrupt leaders and practices.

On the eve of the 2018 General Election, the polling company *Invoke* predicted that PAS would fall to Barisan in Kelantan. That did not pan out. It has been argued that voters in Kelantan, while not enthusiastic about PAS, wanted to keep Barisan out – a “rally around the flag” moment of sorts. They felt that only PAS had a realistic chance of doing so and the Harapan coalition was seen as either not taking Kelantan seriously or being too liberal. It also did not help that Harapan at that time was led by the former UMNO leader responsible for Kelantan's marginalisation, Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

In the 2022 General Election and the 2023 State Election, PAS and Perikatan did well by capturing Malay voters who rejected UMNO due to its reputation for corruption, but still did not trust Harapan. Perikatan also managed to leverage social media and youth networks.

Finally, PAS has been successful at mobilising the Kelantanese diaspora. Some estimates put the number of outstation Kelantanese who returned to vote at 20 per cent. In some constituencies, outstation voters are said to make the difference in

election outcomes. That said, the local Kelantanese are also critical of PAS' rule as the state's underdevelopment is a daily lived reality for them.

## **Conclusion**

The Malay rural youth of Kelantan face complex socioeconomic and cultural challenges. Persistent poverty, limited formal employment, and drug problems add to challenges shaped by insular networks and historical marginalisation. Migration and digital media are eroding traditional pathways while exposing youth to new ideas, but also risks.

Kelantan's development has been an Achilles' heel for PAS' economic reputation. But the inroads it made in other states, such as Terengganu and Kedah, since 2008 has enabled them to showcase what they can do elsewhere.

Overall, the above suggests that PAS' long rule in Kelantan is not sacrosanct. Much of it has been due to the lack of viable alternatives as much as to PAS' strength. The key to challenging PAS' dominance will be to create a political force that understands the state's unique identity, adopts inclusive economic policies, and takes voters seriously.

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