



Johor State Election: A Harsh Spotlight on Pakatan Harapan's Strategy Deficit

Ariel Tan



RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and with due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Johor State Election: A Harsh Spotlight on Pakatan Harapan's Strategy Deficit

By Ariel Tan

SYNOPSIS

Harapan was outmatched by Barisan in campaign strategy and urgently needs to develop a coherent political and governance narrative for the upcoming elections.

COMMENTARY

UMNO's Barisan Nasional coalition won 48 of the 56 seats in the Johor state assembly, leaving the remaining eight for its state rival and federal government partner, Pakatan Harapan. (Barisan had held 40 seats before the state assembly was dissolved, Harapan 12, and Perikatan four.)

The results can be attributed to the popularity and performance of Johor's menteri besar (MB), Onn Hafiz Ghazi; Barisan's superior re-election campaign; the implosion of Perikatan Nasional, BN's Malay-based competitor for Malay voters; and Harapan's campaign strategy shortfall, which failed to assuage Johor voters' concerns ranging from cost-of-living pressures to Harapan's unfulfilled reform promises.

Recent State Elections

While Barisan enjoys historic and unique advantages in Johor, UMNO's birthplace, Pakatan Harapan's shortfall in this campaign is also not new. Its roots lie in Harapan's formation of the unity government under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim with erstwhile nemeses Barisan, Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) and Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) in 2022.

The November 2025 Sabah state election had carried a dire warning for Harapan, which won just one of 73 seats. That seat was won by Anwar's Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), while the Democratic Action Party (DAP) lost all six that it had previously held.

Notably, a few months earlier, students there had burned an effigy of Anwar at an anti-corruption rally. He had stood by GRS leaders despite their implication in a major mining corruption scandal. Harapan had previously raised concerns about corruption, poor governance and Sabah's state rights, but is perceived to have gone soft on these issues given its federal partnership with GRS.

In the 2023 state elections, Harapan's seat holdings dropped in all three states it controlled, namely Penang, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan. Harapan and Barisan had managed to avoid running against each other in those elections. It made tactical sense but reinforced confusion among their party members and supporters.

Strategically, it undermined the parties' standing. UMNO supporters have been told for decades that DAP is anathema to Malay interest. Harapan's rise over the last three decades was based on its reformist and anti-corruption stance and its protest against the Barisan-dominated status quo of centralised federal control and Malay-Muslim dominance, and thus targeted squarely at UMNO/Barisan in West Malaysia and their partners in East Malaysia, as constituted by GRS and GPS today.

Johor

UMNO has acted decisively in response to this challenge. On 16 May, MB Onn Hafiz declared that Barisan would go it alone and contest all 56 seats in Johor. He announced the dissolution of the state assembly on 1 June. PM Anwar and Harapan seemed to have been caught out. They never found their footing.

Alongside Perikatan's fragmentation, this separation enabled UMNO to win back a significant portion of its Malay base without alienating Chinese and Indian voters. MB Onn Hafiz's administration had given space to leaders from Barisan component parties, the Malaysian Chinese Association and the Malaysian Indian Congress.

Ultimately, Barisan's success rested on its governance record under a hands-on MB. Johor beat Harapan-run Selangor to clock in the highest GDP growth in 2024 and a record RM110 billion in approved investment in 2025. While water supply, public transport infrastructure and the widening income gap remained problematic, Johor's broad, if limited, social assistance programme and Onn's engagement with Johoreans on the ground won him wide acceptance.

The federal government has played no small part in providing the political stability and policy support for Johor's economic growth through key projects like the Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone. Unfortunately, Harapan failed to win credit for this, instead being blamed for inflation and higher costs of living and doing business due to reforms such as fuel subsidy rationalisation and e-invoicing requirements for companies.

Barisan stuck to its strong suit – running as a state party, it criticised the federal government for insufficient policy support and unfair funding allocation. It was disciplined in shutting down damaging issues such as Najib's son linking Barisan's victory with Najib's pardon. It did not take the bait when both Mahathir Mohamad and

PAS president Hadi Awang appealed for voters to support continued Malay-Muslim leadership in Johor.

Harapan, however, appeared conflicted in its state role as opposition and federal incumbent. It had held its fire against Barisan at state level as a loyal opposition since 2022. Its criticisms of Barisan during the campaign thus came too late and appeared opportunistic. With PM Anwar's multiple stops in Johor, they were stamped as federal incumbents. Their evergreen "protest" slogans against Najib's pardon, poor governance and corruption sounded dated and dissonant given their federal role.

Pakatan Harapan's Challenges

Midway through the campaign, PM Anwar reminded the public that, regardless of the outcome, he would still be prime minister. At Harapan's press conference following their defeat, an Amanah leader suggested that the Johor results should not be taken as a barometer for the next general election, "We are confident that PH still has the best prime minister candidate so the situation will be quite different."

These comments reinforce the impression that advancing and maintaining Anwar as prime minister was prioritised over Harapan's reformist cause. While this has given Malaysia a precious three and a half years of political stability, Harapan urgently needs to strengthen its governance and political narrative for the coming elections.

DAP leader Anthony Loke has reassured supporters that DAP still enjoys support, particularly in urban areas, where it received at least 80 per cent of the vote from Chinese voters in Johor. However, support across all races appears to have softened compared with the 2022 General Election, particularly in the mixed Malay-majority seats contested by PKR and Amanah. Significant anger among Indian and Chinese former Harapan supporters towards Anwar's perceived pandering to Malay-Muslim sensitivities is widely reported. While these supporters might appear too impatient to change a status quo built over decades, the coalition might need to demonstrate its commitment and ask for more time.

Harapan would also have to manage its partnership with Barisan, even if both enter the next elections as rivals. UMNO now has the option of working with PAS and Wawasan under the aegis of "Malay unity". But Barisan's national ambition and the apparent acceptance of its multiracial constituency in Johor may give it pause. It remains to be seen whether Barisan's Johor results prove to be the first signs of a national recovery. This, in turn, will influence Barisan's approach and demands on the unity government in the remaining time of its term, which ends in December 2027.

Ariel Tan is a Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the Malaysia Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.

