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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **GE13 and the Rural-Urban Divide: A Blurring Line**

By Choong Pui Yee

### **Synopsis**

*The conventional rural-urban categorisation may be useful in analysing Malaysia's 13th general election. However, such classifications have become obscure. Institutional challenges will also continue to skew the weight of each vote.*

### **Commentary**

SPECULATION HAD been rife since last year that the Democratic Action Party (DAP) would be pitting itself against the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) in Johor in this general election. This finally came true on 18 March 2013 when DAP stalwart Lim Kit Siang was announced by opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim to contest Johor's Gelang Patah seat. A stronghold of the BN's Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), 54 percent of Gelang Patah's voters is Chinese, making it a potential opposition hotbed.

As MCA and DAP are traditional opponents vying for the Chinese vote, Lim's move to Gelang Patah is a strategic one by the Pakatan Rakyat opposition alliance which Anwar leads. It is clearly calculated to rattle the MCA further by capitalising on the Chinese voters' increasing support for DAP. Besides, Gelang Patah is a typical urban seat with a significant presence of Chinese voters and is generally tilted towards the opposition, though there are issues that go beyond mere racial lines. All indications are that it is going to be a tough electoral contest between PR and BN, not just in Johor but across the country, especially in the urban seats.

### **Increasing ambiguity of urban-rural divide**

A veteran opposition figure, Lim could very likely be a factor that could draw the apathetic electorate to register their votes in this general election. In the last one in 2008, only 77 percent of the total electorate in Gelang Patah turned out to vote. However, even as PR stacks its cards to contest strategically against BN and would potentially reap more votes in the urban seats, a closer observation suggests that the demarcation of urban and rural seats is increasingly becoming more ambiguous.

Conventionally voting patterns in Malaysia can be discerned by categorising voters into rural and urban seats. The former usually refers to the Malay heartlands where UMNO has a stronger appeal. In such seats, party leaders are also well informed of the sentiments of the grassroots. Maintaining connection with the grassroots is extremely important because rural voters carry more weight than urban voters in terms of voter per constituency.

Conversely, urban seats refer to cities such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang where voters are more cosmopolitan. There is a lack of personal connection with any political party representatives, hence the lack of obligation to be loyal to a particular political party. Therefore, urban voters are more likely to be swayed by other considerations such as the state of national economic development, national policies and issues of social justice.

While such a rural-urban demarcation provides an inkling of the voting patterns, what constitute rural or urban seats are in fact highly ambiguous and debatable because such categories change over time. Economic development, urbanisation and intra-migration of Malaysians will change the social landscape of a particular seat. Such factors are also compounded by the demographic and social class of the voters in a particular seat.

In today's Malaysia, the urban population is estimated to be 63 percent but not all of this urban population are registered in the urban seats. This means many in this supposedly urban population are required to vote in the rural seats. For example, a first time voter who is registered in a rural seat but has been studying or working in an urban seat may consider a range of issues before he casts his ballot in a rural seat. Whereas his parents who already have a personal connection with a particular political party may continue to vote for that party due to reasons of familiarity or continuity. The question is, will this group of urbanised rural voters be able to influence the voting patterns of their older folks?

### **Growing social activism**

Another factor that has blurred the demarcation between urban and rural voters in recent times is the growing role of civil society movements and their mobilisation and publicity through the social media. For instance, Bersih and the Anti-Lynas group have successfully mobilised a cross section of Malaysians to fight for clean and fair elections and environmental issues through the channels of social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

Besides taking their causes to the street, videos, poems and personal stories were dispersed in the social media realm, causing a rhizomatic or random effect to netizens in Malaysia. Such social activism helped raise the awareness of the electorate and may perhaps influence some fence sitters.

More importantly, social activism also transcends the urban and rural divide as well as the racial differences. Evidence of this can be seen when Malaysians from the rural areas travel to the cities to participate in the Bersih rallies in 2011 and 2012. Similarly, the anti-Lynas group has also initiated a 300 km march from Kuantan to Kuala Lumpur and along the way were joined by supporters from various constituencies.

### **Election Commission and institutional challenges**

In addition, challenges arising from the electoral system itself could complicate the weight of each voter in the various seats - regardless of the rural-urban divide. Take the evidence of phantom or dubious voters such as voters having the same identity card numbers but with different addresses; voters whose nationalities are questionable; and voters who are dead but whose status have not been updated in the electoral role. According to the Malaysian Electoral Roll Analysis Project (MERAP), the number of such dubious voters easily stands at 400,000.

That said, the Election Commission has responded to some of the demands of Bersih. Some examples of reform include the use of indelible ink and allowing overseas Malaysians to do postal voting. Nevertheless, reforms are at a nascent stage.

Hitherto, such challenges arising from the Election Commission will remain to complicate the percentage and weight of each voter in the various seats – regardless of the rural-urban divide.

In the final analysis, factors that will impact the result in the Malaysian general election are no longer confined to urban or rural categories but a wider range of issues. In short, the picture has become more complex.

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