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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Battle for Kelantan: Will PAS remain in power?**

By Afif Pasuni

### **Synopsis**

*Kelantan is an opposition-held state where one does not usually expect a fierce electoral battle. But with a small vote swing enough to turn the tide, Kelantan also deserves a closer look during this coming general election.*

### **Commentary**

THE NORTHEASTERN state of Kelantan which has been ruled by the opposition Islamist Party PAS for the past few decades is an important battleground where 45 state seats are up for grabs, in addition to 14 parliamentary constituencies. Its population is 95% Malay-Muslim, which is why the seats are usually a contest between the traditionally Malay-Muslim PAS and UMNO parties. Some 900,000 people are expected to cast their votes, 150,000 of them working in urban areas outside Kelantan.

PAS has been in power for a total of 42 years. For a brief period between 1973-1978 it was part of the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, but in more recent years it has been a member of the opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat (PR). In 1990 PAS swept clean all 39 state seats and since then, PAS has held on to Kelantan in the subsequent elections of 1995, 1999, 2004, and the most recent one in 2008.

### **Piety and prosperity**

The BN meanwhile had been at the losing end in Kelantan, except in 2004 when it almost caused an upset by winning 21 state seats mainly due to positive voter sentiment that accompanied the rise of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. As for parliamentary seats, BN's performance in the previous five elections was poor save in 2004 when it won eight seats, while it obtained only one or two seats between 1990 and 2008.

Economic development has always been a popular issue in elections, especially in the poorer states in Malaysia like Kelantan. For PAS, this relates to the issue of oil royalty, which it claims is being unfairly withheld by the federal government. The PAS state government nonetheless claims its economic growth in recent years is higher than the national average, although some estimates put the figure at an average of 3% annually.

BN is meanwhile offering Kelantanese a slew of economic investments, ranging from a new highway, stadium, public housing projects, upgraded public transportation system, university, and several other projects. Without discounting the valency of such projects whenever election nears, there are also other issues which the voters will be considering. Among these projects is a new mosque, touted to be the biggest one in Kelantan and

expected to cost some RM50 million. One of the key symbols of piety and a major reason for PAS' persistent success in Kelantan is its chief minister Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, who is regarded as a pious leader by his followers. While PAS' economic development is lagging compared to many states, the party undoubtedly commands a higher degree of legitimacy as its leaders are seen to be more upright than those of the ruling parties. Furthermore PAS' policy of restrained consumption contrasts with BN's perceived extravagance, an issue which could resonate dearly with its 150,000 urban voters who are mainly based in Malaysia's capital.

In terms of its appeal to the conservative support base, PAS' close relationship with the opposition coalition is not likely to place it at a disadvantage, if the 2008 election results are anything to go by. Thus PAS' appeal is likely to remain high among Malay-Muslim voters in Kelantan. In recent years, PAS has appeared to be more open than the secular UMNO party, to the extent of fielding a Christian Chinese candidate and an Indian woman for the coming election. This newer image however is balanced out by the more conservative elements within the party, and even cancelled out at times by PAS' conservative stance on religious issues.

### **Swinging support**

But all is not lost for BN's UMNO which has proved its potential in the 2004 general election when it almost took control of the state. However in the 2008 elections, the UMNO state leadership that almost brought victory in Kelantan was cast aside – a move described by commentators as internal sabotage. While the factions seemed to have reconciled over time, internal politicking has always been UMNO's Achilles heel. There has also been talk of UMNO stalwart Tengku Razaleigh's newly-formed group Amanah being a potential kingmaker in the upcoming election, reviving memories of his Semangat 46 party which temporarily allied with the opposition.

Although facing a seemingly uphill battle, there are some grounds for BN to make considerable headway in Kelantan. Firstly, the numbers have suggested that a 7-8% vote swing may reverse the tide against them. In the 2004 elections in which they almost won the state assembly, the popular votes were very closely split down the middle. In 2008, despite a lackluster performance, BN obtained 43% of popular votes compared to the opposition's 56%. This means that BN still maintains a sizeable Kelantanese support, and a small swing in their favour may be sufficient to cause a surprise victory.

In addition, there are six state seats in which the Chinese community plays a key role, and this is where PM Najib Razak's 1Malaysia policy might just be able to sway the voters to BN's camp. Although PAS is keen to promote its newer image, its stance on several religious issues is somewhat controversial, and may drive away non-Muslim support from the Pakatan Rakyat coalition that it is a part of.

The political parties are already geared up for what promises to be one of the most intense elections in Malaysia's history. Some estimates have projected the UMNO-led BN to beat the opposition narrowly in terms of total parliamentary seats won. As such, every single voter is important, especially for BN should it wish to stay in power. Even in Kelantan where it has frequently been regarded as the underdog, an above-average performance might be the key in it snatching Kelantan away from PAS and returning BN to Putrajaya at the federal level.

For PAS, Kelantan is the litmus test of the party – whether the changes brought by its alliance with the opposition coalition have been beneficial, or whether they have been to PAS' disadvantage. Either way, the outcome in Kelantan will be critical in this coming general election.

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