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Kedah the Weakest Link for PR in GE 13?

By Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman

Synopsis

Kedah has been touted as one of the frontline states in Malaysia's 13th general elections, arguably at risk of being toppled by the Barisan Nasional. While this result is likely, the ability of PR to defend the state with increased support amongst Chinese voters is also possible.

Commentary

The northern state of Kedah was one of the four states that fell to the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (People's Coalition) in the 2008 election together with Penang, Perak and Selangor. Several factors such as the division within UMNO Kedah, the unhappiness over income inequality and the issue of corruption were cited as factors leading to the fall of the Barisan Nasional government. The PR government was headed by PAS' Azizan Abdul Razak as Chief Minister of Kedah.

The Report Card on PR's Administration in Kedah

Dato' Azizan has been hailed as a people's leader who has carried out reforms to eradicate corruption and increase foreign investment into the state. In Alor Setar, one could observe that the state government has been on top of municipal issues with many residents expressing their satisfaction at the improved cleanliness of the city under the PR government. The level of corruption has declined significantly.

On the economic front the government has initiated several new development projects. Investments into Kedah were estimated by the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority (MIDA) at a record of RM15.89 billion between 2008 and 2012. The government of Kedah also managed to open up a total of 22,440 job opportunities for the people of the state.

Nevertheless, the Kedah state government's performance is far from satisfactory. Azizan was seen by some even within PAS as being an indecisive and ineffectual leader. His health conditions have been cited as an impediment to a robust decision making process. A case in point is the state government's failure in managing the state-owned Kolej Universiti Insaniah (Kuin). More importantly, the ideological challenge that he faced within PAS' fold has impacted the party's strength at the grassroots' level.

Intra-Ideological Struggle within PAS Kedah

A key problem facing PAS in Kedah is the ideological struggle between the chief minister, seen to be a conservative aligned to party president, Hadi Awang, and the former PAS Kedah Deputy Commissioner, Datuk

Phahrolrazi Mohd Zawawi, seen to be the leader of the reformist group in Kedah. Azizan is seen by many of the reformist figures as being too soft on UMNO and its leaders. PAS members were aghast when billboards bearing Azizan's portrait went up in parts of Kedah proclaiming his government's support for the 1Malaysia concept. However, this election has seen a near complete annihilation of the reformist faction.

Several key figures within Phahrolrazi's faction were dropped from the list of candidates for the upcoming elections. It was said that PAS Kedah sent a new list of candidates to the Islamist party's headquarters in Kuala Lumpur omitting the names of candidates who are seen to be opposing Azizan. Phahrolrazi himself was switched from his Pengkalan Kundor state seat to Jerlun parliamentary seat, an UMNO stronghold, in a move that is seen to end his political career.

The case of Kedah has shown that the ideological differences, long denied by party leaders, are beginning to take a toll on the party. It is likely that such differences will emerge to further divide the party in other states such as Perlis and Terengganu.

Islamist Tendencies and the Crucial Chinese Votes

The Kedah government has also been accused of transgressing the rights of non-Muslims in the state. In 2009 the DAP left the Kedah state government over a series of measures that were seen to curtail non-Muslim rights in the state. This included Azizan's failure to stop the demolition of a pig slaughterhouse as well as the state government's decision to raise housing quota for bumiputras from 30% to 50%. Several measures such as the attempt to ban women from performing on stage during Chinese New Year and turn Kulim town into a "no-alcohol" district, did not go down well with many non-Muslims.

These policies are argued to have triggered dissatisfaction among the Chinese voters in the state and Chinese support for PAS might be dwindling. Non-Muslims account for nearly a quarter of voters in Kedah. In several seats such as Derga and Kota Darulaman, the non-Muslim votes could play a major role in determining the outcome of the elections. The current government will need the non-Muslim votes to offset the shift of the Malay voters away from PR. The ability of PR to increase their support amongst Chinese voters could prove crucial in their retaining the state.

Kedah is BN's to Lose

Given the state of disarray of PR in Kedah, there is a high probability that the state might fall to BN. There are several factors that point to this. First, PR currently holds a slim majority of only four seats in the Kedah state assembly. Second, there are at least six seats currently held by PR which were won by margins of less than a thousand votes. With the exception of Kota Darulaman currently held by DAP, these seats are also Malay majority seats. Given the expected nationwide trend of Malay voters returning to BN, these seats could be easily won by BN. A mere shift of five seats could lead to PR losing Kedah. However the comfortable position that BN is currently enjoying in Kedah could be quickly altered if UMNO in Kedah remains divided.

In this regard, the likely choice of Mukhriz Mahathir as the next chief minister of Kedah has resulted in disgruntlement amongst some UMNO leaders in the state. UMNO in Kedah seems to be divided into the pro-Mahathir and anti-Mahathir factions. In areas such as Pokok Sena and Pendang which are strongholds of PAS, the presence of Mahathir has proven to be a boon for the party. UMNO leaders in these areas view Mukhriz's entry as a threat to their own claim to the coveted chief minister position. It is possible that they might sabotage Mukhriz's campaign with the aim of burying his political career. Mukhriz has also less traction with younger voters who are less concerned about candidates' family background and assess them solely based on their own credentials. The youth votes are another important group that BN must capture.

Conclusion

The struggle for Kedah is going to be one of the most significant battles in this election. It seems that Kedahans are equally divided along political lines. Ultimately, the race will be decided by the ability of each of the coalition's key constituents. For PR, the coalition must capture the Chinese votes that could tip the balance in its favour whereas the BN especially UMNO must ensure that there is no internal sabotage of its candidates.

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