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After Sarawak: What's Next for Barisan Nasional?

By Saleena Saleem

Synopsis

Barisan Nasional's strong showing at the 11th Sarawak state elections is not reflective of the electoral challenges that lie ahead of GE14; in fact, the Sarawak experience magnifies the weaknesses of the ruling coalition in Peninsula Malaysia.

Commentary

THE SWEEPING victory of Malaysia's ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN), at the recent state elections in Sarawak gives scandal-ridden Prime Minister Najib Razak a much-needed political boost. Although Najib strengthened his political position last year by removing dissenters in the cabinet and in statutory boards over the 1MDB scandal, public confidence in his government remains low and he still faces internal party dissent.

Najib's fervent opponents, such as former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, have warned that Najib's continuation as PM would lead to BN's electoral downfall. Najib's supporters are already using BN's easy win of 72 out of 82 seats in Sarawak to bolster the call for a strong and unified BN front moving forward. However, by emphasising the Sarawak win, BN risks raising public expectations in the upcoming by-elections at Sungai Besar and Kuala Kangsar in Peninsula Malaysia, and magnifying its weakness. So even if the ruling coalition retains the seats, but at margins lower than expected, it could lead to a downward momentum going forward to the 14th general election to be called by 2018 (GE14).

BN's Persistent Challenges

BN's political strategists would do well to downplay the big win in Sarawak, which

analysts have already attributed to local factors, external to the ruling coalition, such as good governance by Chief Minister Adenan Satem since he took over in 2013, absence of voter anger as in the 2011 election, and a disorganised opposition coalition infighting about seat distributions.

The popularity of Adenan's new reforms in his home state serves to remind voters of Najib's ineffectual leadership thus far, which gets particularly heightened during an economic downturn. For instance, 1MDB's recent bond interest payment default and tumbling oil prices weakened the ringgit again, raising investor concerns over the Malaysian government having to assume 1MDB's debt burden.

While BN was expected to do well in Sarawak, which is a traditional bastion for the ruling coalition, the high margin win will now galvanise the opposition to avoid repeating the same mistakes in Peninsula Malaysia, which will raise the stakes for BN. One way forward for BN's political strategists is to consider all of the factors that led to the observed swing voting pattern in Sarawak.

Chinese Swing Vote

The Sarawak election results show that the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) lost seats in areas where Chinese are in the moderate majority (approximately 50-60%). Explanations for the shift to BN propounded by analysts include the "Adenan" exceptionalism factor, and Chinese optimism over Adenan's receptiveness on educational and economic opportunities for the community.

However, another reason that is less emphasised but pertinent nevertheless, is the growing perception amongst segments of the Chinese that changes long promised by DAP are unlikely to be forthcoming. This sense of disillusionment was reflected in the low Chinese turn-out observed at the DAP rallies in Sarawak.

Over the last decade, the opposition coalition garnered electoral support by campaigning on a narrative of change that was based on democratic ideals of equality, justice and fairness. The change imagined required the eventual dismantling of affirmative action policies that benefitted the *bumiputras*. It was a narrative that captured the hearts and minds of many Chinese (and some Malays), including those in Sarawak, and culminated in BN's loss of the popular vote for the first time in the 2013 general election.

However, despite all of the opposition coalition's rhetoric on change, the perception that minority ethnic group interests are being progressively sidelined as the Malay-dominated ruling coalition tactically responds to its Malay voter base is gaining ground.

While DAP will always retain its Chinese hardcore voter base, just as UMNO will always retain its hardcore Malay voter base, the challenge for the ruling coalition would be to articulate a convincing enough narrative that builds on the growing perception of DAP's ineffectual politics, so as to attract enough of the non-Malay swing voters in areas where it could matter. For example, the Malaysian Chinese Association president Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai has already suggested that BN's win, was in part, due to Chinese loss of trust in the opposition coalition.

Of course, much would depend on BN's ability to reframe itself as the only centrist multi-ethnic coalition that would be able to protect Chinese interests, as promised in the political compact of the past. This would require uphill work given that the ruling coalition bears some responsibility in the polarising inter-ethnic pressures seen in Malaysia society today.

Divided Malay Vote Conundrum

The challenge for BN in moderating its political discourse to attract the swing non-Malay voters in Peninsula Malaysia is UMNO's contestations with other Malay-based parties, such as PAS and PKR, for the crucial Malay vote.

UMNO's tried and tested strategy in attracting the Malay vote has been to portray itself as the genuine protector of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay dominance) to defend itself from criticism by its opponents and rally Malay support. It does this by framing criticism by the opposition as fuelled by an anti-Malay and anti-Muslim agenda.

This was easier to do when PAS and PKR collaborated with DAP in the opposition, but may prove to be a challenge now that its long-time rival, PAS, is on its own with a strong Malay-Muslim grassroots base. Coupled with conservative societal forces shaped by Malay rights and Islamic civil society groups, UMNO efforts at being more openly inclusive in its political discourse may be constrained.

Reframing for Broad Appeal

While politics in Sarawak vastly differs from Peninsula Malaysia, given the different ethnic makeup and political trajectories thus far, the Sarawak results does demonstrate that voting shifts can and do occur when voters are given enough of a reason and their primary concerns are addressed, and that it can occur in spite of pressures to vote along ethnic lines.

It may be a struggle, but if the ruling coalition is able to reframe itself to broadly appeal to segments of voters in the different ethnic groups while managing the economic situation, it may just be able to stem the tide of public disaffection. The upcoming by-elections in Peninsula Malaysia will likely provide a more accurate harbinger of BN's strategic direction, the challenges faced and its probable performance during GE14.

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