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RSIS Series on Malaysia's 14th General Election

Black Swan, Dark Horse, and Elephant in the Room

By Joseph Chin Yong Liow

Synopsis

As Malaysians prepare to vote in the 14th general election on 9 May 2018, three key features mark the country's most crucial political struggle in years.

Commentary

ELECTIONS HAVE apparently become such seismic events in Malaysia in recent years that people have taken to describing them with oceanographic metaphors. In 2008, a "political tsunami" swept the opposition into power in five state legislatures, in the process denying the Barisan Nasional (BN) a two-thirds parliamentary majority for the first time since 1969.

In 2013, a "Chinese tsunami" deepened the divide in Malaysian society as ethnic Chinese voters flocked en masse to the opposition, enabling it to secure the majority vote for the first time in Malaysian history. This year, some are predicting an impending Malay "tsunami", which presumably will sweep the opposition Pakatan Harapan (PH) into power. If indeed the opposition can win a significant percentage of Malay votes, the effect would be seismic indeed (and potentially catastrophic for Prime Minister Najib Razak and UMNO).

Winning the Malay Demographic

The reason why PH, the third opposition coalition in two decades assembled to challenge the ruling BN (after the Barisan Alternatif and the Pakatan Rakyat), is making a major tactical play for Malay votes should be obvious to the seasoned Malaysia watcher. Despite hopeful civil society calls for a paradigm shift to "Multiracial

Malaysian seats,” the reality remains that winning the Malay demographic is absolutely essential.

This is not only because Malays are the majority ethnic group in the country, but, more consequentially, they command all the main levers of political, bureaucratic, and increasingly, economic power by dint of almost five decades of affirmative action policies. But winning the Malay vote will not be an easy task given that UMNO, whose clarion call since its formation in 1946 has been “*Hidup Melayu*” (Long Live the Malays), managed to secure 64 percent of the popular Malay vote at the last election in 2013.

To make inroads into the UMNO base, PH has set itself two major targets: they have trained their guns on seats where the UMNO-led BN command only a paper-thin majority, and they are hell-bent on winning the state of Johor, the birthplace of UMNO and its current stronghold.

Black Swan

To achieve these targets, PH is depending on three Malay-based opposition parties in its stable: Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Amanah, and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (better known as Bersatu, or PPBM). Of the three, Bersatu undoubtedly holds out the most intriguing prospect. The party is the new political vehicle for Mahathir Mohamad, the indomitable former prime minister who now chairs Bersatu and who the opposition has put forward as their prime ministerial candidate.

He is supported by a handful of disgruntled senior UMNO figures, including former deputy prime minister and UMNO deputy president, Muhyiddin Yassin, and a rank-and-file comprising many former UMNO members. Its allies in PH are hoping that the entrance of Bersatu, which will be contesting the most parliamentary seats among the four Peninsula-based opposition parties, into the fray will move the needle on prospects for electoral victory and a change of government.

The appearance of Mahathir on the opposition ticket is possibly the biggest “black swan” in recent Malaysian history. Mahathir, who has thrived on controversy his entire political career is proving immensely popular among the younger electorate who know him as their first prime minister and Malaysia’s “Father of Modernisation”. Yet, fascination with his rebranding notwithstanding, Mahathir remains the quintessential UMNO man and Bersatu, the archetypal anti-UMNO UMNO.

Therein lies the paradox: to the extent that the opposition is banking on a Malay “tsunami” to defeat UMNO, they see the catalyst to be precisely the UMNO-isque aura that Mahathir and Bersatu exude.

Double-edged Sword

But this strategy is also double-edged. After all, Mahathir was very much complicit in fomenting the culture of patronage politics that he now blames for the endemic corruption that he alleges has crept into UMNO under Najib. There are other intriguing historical anomalies surrounding the twist of fate that now has Mahathir playing the role of opposition leader.

Mahathir has been relentless in his efforts to vanquish Najib. Yet ironically, history remembers Najib's father, Tun Abdul Razak, as the person who rescued and revived Mahathir's own political career in 1973 after he was banished to the political wilderness several years earlier for criticising Malaysia's founding prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman.

And if that is not intriguing enough, the wily "Tun" (as Mahathir is fondly called by his supporters) is attempting to unseat Najib with the help of Anwar Ibrahim, his former padawan or protégé whose career he also sought to destroy not too long ago. The real question is whether the deep reservoir of distrust that had accumulated between the two has really been drained, or merely set aside for the moment for reasons of political expediency.

Dark Horse

It remains to be seen if their collective effort can shift the abiding political narrative of Malay-Muslim identity in their favour. In this respect, no discussion on the "Malay vote" can discount the role of PAS, the Islamist opposition.

Since the early 1980s, when the party leadership fell into the hands of religious clerics, PAS has been trying to advance its religious agenda as an alternative to UMNO. It has however, enjoyed only limited success, with the possible exception of its stronghold in Kelantan. In fact, the PAS record is telling of a rather curious anomaly: electorally, PAS has been most successful when it worked in coalition with non-Malay parties.

For now, the Islamist opposition appears to have decided to go it alone, although there is evidence some of their leaders, including party president Abdul Hadi Awang, are leaning favourably towards UMNO. Precedence suggests such a strategy would not work in PAS' favour, and the party is not likely to win many seats – whether state or federal – on their own steam. At the same time, however, PAS will be in a position to deny victory to PH's Malay parties.

The party leadership has already announced its intention to contest in more than 130 parliamentary seats – even more than UMNO. The implication of this is a large number of three-cornered fights. This will likely work in favour of UMNO, especially in seats where majorities are thin. With the rumour mill going into overdrive on secret agreements between UMNO and PAS, PH's inability to keep the Islamist party within its fold, or away from UMNO, may prove costly indeed.

Elephant in the Room

The grand themes of politics are mostly played out in the peninsula. In this respect, GE14 is proving no different. Yet, a key determining factor may well lie in the eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak.

Together, Sabah and Sarawak account for almost a quarter of parliamentary seats. This means any coalition that aspires to form the ruling government must stake a

strong presence in the eastern states. Yet, Sabah and Sarawak appear again to be largely out of reach of the opposition.

Notwithstanding the emergence of a narrative of indigenous nationalism, Sabah politics remains by and large devoid of ideology. Indeed, it is hard not to notice the staggering number of times Sabah parties and personalities have switched allegiances. Added to that the distrust of Mahathir because of the Sabah riots of 1986 and the controversy surrounding the influx of illegal immigrants.

The situation is hardly better in Sarawak. While Sarawak remains the only state where UMNO has no presence, because of its close relationship with Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), UMNO has never felt any urgency to address that. Some suggest a possible spanner in the works as Taib Mahmud, the larger than life former chief minister who still wields considerable influence, was one of Mahathir's closest allies during their heyday.

It remains to be seen however, if old friendships and loyalties will trump crude pragmatism. The fact is that Sabah and Sarawak have always proven elusive for Malaysian opposition coalitions, and this appears to be the case yet again. In the context of a likely stalemate in the peninsula, Pakatan Harapan's inability to make serious inroads on the eastern front remains their Achilles' heel.

Of course, politics is the art of the possible. Nowhere is this more evident than in Malaysia today, where a nonagenarian is leading a reformist movement comprising former enemies intent on overthrowing a system which in many ways is his own creation. But there is no escaping the reality that for the opposition coalition, fundamental differences remain.

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