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*RSIS Series on Malaysia's 14th General Election*

## **Gerrymandering & Its Potential Impact**

*By Johan Saravanamuttu*

### **Synopsis**

*The redelineation exercise in Malaysia was met with severe criticism. Detractors accused it of being a measure to consolidate the ruling coalition's support base while simultaneously marginalising opposition support. Will it change the political fortunes of the power players?*

### **Commentary**

IN A press statement on 1 May 2018, Charles Santiago, the incumbent parliamentarian for Klang in the politically-prized state of Selangor suggested the impact of gerrymandering would be "wide and far-reaching". In fact the lawmaker had earlier filed an injunction to stop the redelineation process, but to no avail. He had suggested that a number of parliamentary constituencies in the state, such as Shah Alam and Kapar, both parliamentary seats, and Port Klang, a state seat, could return to Barisan Nasional (BN) because of the redelineation.

A total of 40,983 voters from Shah Alam and Kapar parliamentary constituencies have been moved to Klang. This would turn the two parliamentary seats and one state seat from being safe to become marginal seats for the opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH).

### **Overview Of Redelineation Exercise**

The redelineation exercise that was passed by parliament on 28 March 2018 may be seen as an attempt to further check Opposition strength. The exercise has turned out to be a form of gerrymandering combined with the malapportionment of voters to

strengthen seats in BN's rural base. In all, 98 constituencies in the Peninsula have been altered.

The new delineation has created the largest parliamentary seat in Bangi (formerly Serdang), held by the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP), which boasts a massive 178,790 electors. In contrast, the smallest seat in the same state of Selangor, Sabak Bernam - largely rural and held by UMNO - the linchpin of BN, has 40,863 electors. The difference is more than 400%!

In the current exercise, gerrymandering could prove to be an important tool. Gerrymandering is the movement of specific voter blocs to constituencies for political advantage, sometimes creating odd-shaped constituencies. This time around, the EC was handicapped by the fact that it could not increase the number of parliamentary constituencies, which is fixed at 222.

Doing so would have required a two-thirds majority of votes in the Dewan Rakyat (Lower House), which BN was unlikely to get. The Sarawak and Sabah state legislatures, which had BN supermajorities, were redrawn earlier to increase the state seats by 11 and 13 respectively.

### **Predicting Impact of Redelineation**

INVOKE, an NGO established by Rafizi Ramli, the vice-president of PKR, however, believes that the impact of redelineation on the Opposition will be minimal. INVOKE's opinion survey of March 2018 forecasts PH winning 89 seats to BN's 76 in the Peninsula. Malay support for BN was said to have dropped to 28.5%.

In its latest poll of 30 April, Malay support for BN even dropped further to only 18.1%. The argument is thus that if there is a massive Malay swing to PH, this could overcome the purported effect of the redelineation exercise.

The second study is by Politweet, an independent social media research firm. A total of 300 simulations were run based on three scenarios of voter behaviour and their results are shown in the table below:

<b>Party</b>	<b>Seats Contested</b>	<b>Scenario1 (Voter sentiment of 2013)</b>	<b>Scenario2 (+2% support for Opposition)</b>	<b>Scenario3 (+3-5% support for Opposition)</b>
<b>PPBM</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>3-6</b>	<b>7-12</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>PKR</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>31-34</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>DAP</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>33-34</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Amanah</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>14-18</b>	<b>18-19</b>	<b>20-22</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>76-83</b>	<b>89-99</b>	<b>115-117</b>

*Source: Election Forecast for Pakatan Harapan (PH) in Peninsular Malaysia (GE14) 11 January 2018 by Politweet.*

*PH coalition:  
PKR: Parti Keadilan Rakyat  
PPBM: Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia  
DAP: Democratic Action Party  
Amanah: Parti Amanah Negara*

### **Two conclusions are worth noting:**

- Under Scenario 3, for PH to win three-corner fights against BN and PAS, the opposition Islamist party which is not part of the opposition coalition, PH would have to gain 10% of pro-BN supporters if 10% of the anti-BN vote goes to PAS.
- Simulations based on the current constituency redelineation predicts that BN would win an additional 10 seats. These would be Amanah seats of Kuala Nerus in Terengganu; Bukit Gantang and Lumut in Perak; as well as Hulu Langat and Sepang in Selangor. PKR, the anchor of the opposition coalition, would lose in Kapar in Selangor; Lembah Pantai; Telok Kemang in Negri Sembilan; Bukit Katil in Melaka and; Batu Pahat in Johor.

### **Reducing the Significance of Opposition Supporters?**

For the most part, the redelineation exercise in the Peninsula involved tinkering with various constituencies, renaming them, and moving blocs of Malay and Chinese voters to reduce the impact of mixed seats on the BN by creating more ethnic-dominant constituencies.

Some seats have been shrunk while others were expanded. It also appears that more Opposition supporters have been moved into Opposition-strongholds, thus limiting the spread of PH supporters while Malay BN supporters have been moved to Opposition seats to make them winnable.

One prime example of such gerrymandering this is Kapar, where the proportion of Malays has increased from 51% to 71% while the Chinese have come down from 34% to 15%. The constituency has been thus reduced by around 20,000 electors and it is now more winnable for the BN.

Another example is Lembah Pantai where an increase of 6,950 electors has led the proportion of Malay voters to increase from 55% to 63%, Chinese voters decreasing from 23% to 16% and Indian voters down to 16% from an original 20%.

Other important seats that have been gerrymandered are Opposition strongholds such as Subang (known formerly as Kelana Jaya) which has seen a 44,000 size increase, while seats such as Sungei Buloh (formerly Subang) have been reduced in size by 37,000, making the former even safer and the latter somewhat marginal for the PH.

### **Foregone Conclusion?**

The exercise of increasing the number of ethnically dominant seats has been criticised as an attempt at reinforcing, rather than moderating, Malaysia's race-based politics. Johor, Selangor and Perak are the most affected, with 19, 18, and 16 parliamentary seats and their corresponding state-level seats seeing redrawing.

The Kuala Lumpur Federal Territory saw 10 redelineations. Selangor is an Opposition state while Johor and Perak are two battleground BN states likely to face concerted Opposition forays.

To be sure, it is still difficult to predict the effect of redelineation for GE14. Beyond redrawn boundaries, one has to factor in new voters, as well as the impact of the substantial increase in three-corner and multi-cornered fights. In all likelihood margins of victories will become slimmer.

However, as the Politiweet study shows, much has changed on the electoral terrain in Malaysia and electoral success is not a foregone conclusion for the ruling coalition.

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