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RSIS Series on the 14th Malaysian General Election

Backflow of Chinese Voters: Real or Imagined?

By Oh Ei Sun

Synopsis

There has been talk of ethnic Chinese voter “backflow” to the ruling coalition in Malaysia. While this may be exaggerated, it remains to be seen if this month’s general election would lead to a more inclusive government.

Commentary

AS MALAYSIANS go to the polls once again, the political attitude of the country’s ethnic Chinese voters will be closely watched. While the overall election results could shape the Malaysian political landscape, the voting preference of the Chinese community could also be a key factor.

In the last general election in 2013, Prime Minister Najib Razak blamed the slim victory of the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN), on a “Chinese tsunami”, referring to the massive defection of ethnic Chinese voters to a unified opposition. The question is whether Chinese support remains with the opposition, or whether it is creeping back to BN. Talk of a “backflow” of Chinese voters has emerged amid the new narrative of a “Malay tsunami”. While a Malay tidal wave remains debated, the supposed backflow of Chinese voters appears exaggerated.

Chinese Representation

During the current campaign, Najib continued to stress the importance of maintaining Chinese representation within BN, a coalition based on communal politics. Last week a group of 20 Chinese NGOs met Najib to discuss this and other issues of concern to the community.

The political aspirations of the community is mainly represented by the race-based MCA and the “non-racial” but “Chinese-based” Gerakan in West Malaysia, as well as the nominally multiracial Sarawak United People’s Party (SUPP) in Sarawak, and Liberal Democratic Party and Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) in Sabah. MCA and Gerakan have also extended their wings into Sabah, with mixed electoral success.

On the opposition bench, Chinese voters are manifested in seats held by the secular Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the multi-racial Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). Traditionally, parliamentary and state seats with a majority of Chinese voters, or where the latter made up a significant minority, were mostly held by BN especially its component parties above.

Issues that most affected the Chinese community, such as business, education and culture, have supposedly been championed by BN’s Chinese ministers in the cabinet discussions and decisions. Nevertheless, the Chinese community’s dissatisfaction with certain governmental policies perceived as disadvantageous to it persisted, especially in education.

The community has long set up independent schools for ethnic Chinese students. The public examination certificates issued by such Chinese independent schools are widely accepted for university admissions around the world but not for Malaysian public universities. This has been a recurring issue in Malaysia’s Chinese-related politics, with the BN’s Chinese-based component parties widely perceived by the community as not having been effective in advancing its interests in education.

Backflow of Chinese Electoral Support?

These negative sentiments came to a head in 2008 when Chinese voters voted overwhelmingly in favour of DAP and PKR, and together the opposition coalition managed to deny BN’s much vaunted two-thirds constitution-amending parliamentary majority. MCA more than halved its seats in consequence while Gerakan was reduced to one seat.

By the 2013 general election, MCA seats were further halved while Gerakan retained its single seat. The East Malaysian BN component parties were also hard hit in their Chinese seats. DAP and PKR achieved their best electoral results by then, thanks in large part to overwhelming Chinese voter support, which led to Prime Minister Najib’s “Chinese tsunami” outburst.

MCA initially refused to take cabinet posts after the 2013 general election, accepting responsibility for their electoral defeat. MCA’s stand was perceived as a “courageous” move although many in community had lost hope in the MCA. But after a change in party leadership, MCA ministers were swiftly reinstated in cabinet by Prime Minister Najib.

There were, however, at least two bright spots in Chinese community support for BN after 2013. In a 2015 parliamentary by-election in Perak state, the Gerakan president was elected with a slim majority on the back of a slight Chinese voter “backflow” percentage-wise. This result has since been widely held up by BN as manifesting

renewed Chinese support for BN. The next year Sarawak held its state election, the first after the exit of a former chief minister disfavoured by the local Chinese community.

The Chinese votes for SUPP rebounded, perhaps in response to the friendly overtures towards the community. These included the unprecedented recognition of Chinese independent school examination certificates for admission into the Sarawak Civil Service. This more liberal policy coincided with the emergence of a much more popular new chief minister, Adenan Satem, thus enabling SUPP to regain many of its previously-held state seats.

Inclusive Politics?

But these positive developments in terms of Chinese support for BN have been arguably attenuated by at least three developments. First, the unsettling series of internationally reported events relating to the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) saga has since come to the full attention of many politically-aware Chinese voters.

MCA's and Gerakan's continued acquiescence to, as opposed to DAP's and PKR's stern condemnation of the government over 1MDB, irks the more issue-oriented Chinese voters. In Sarawak, Adenan passed away not long after the state election; his successor who continues his policies is yet to be electorally tested. It would be interesting to see if SUPP could carry forward its 2016 state election victory into another sweep in this general election.

Former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad's surprising leadership of the opposition was initially perceived to be a mixed blessing for the opposition. While his new role could divert some UMNO votes to the opposition, it could also repel some Chinese voters who still see him as someone who could have done more to accommodate Chinese aspirations while he was in power.

Political Pragmatism or Change?

But if there is any lesson in the continued Chinese support for Anwar Ibrahim, the jailed opposition leader, it is this: the community placed more importance on rejection of the present UMNO-dominated government than the past of opposition figures.

These all lead to a rather dire outlook for Chinese support for BN, even though it is favoured in some surveys to win in the polls. Talk of complete electoral wipeouts of MCA and Gerakan may be rife. But it remains to be seen if a scenario emerges whereby the political interest of Malaysia's Chinese community is almost exclusively represented by the opposition -- or whether there could be an expansion of BN to rope in the opposition DAP instead.

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