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*RSIS Series on 14th Malaysian General Election*

## **Penang's Multi-cornered Contests: Challenges Amid Certainty?**

*By Chan Xin Ying*

### **Synopsis**

*In Malaysia's general election this week, the political contest at the state level in Penang will see many multi-cornered fights. Hence, while Penang is always considered 'safe' for the opposition coalition, there are challenges not only from BN, but also from other local issues.*

### **Commentary**

PENANG STATE is widely regarded as a safe deposit for the opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH). Of the 13 federal seats in Penang, 10 were won by the now-defunct Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition. The Democratic Action Party (DAP) won seven of these. The DAP also holds 19 out of the 40 state assembly seats in Penang, with its coalition partner Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) steered by Anwar Ibrahim controlling another 10.

Only two parliamentary seats (Bukit Mertajam and Tanjong) will see a one-on-one contest between PH and Barisan Nasional (BN), while only one state assembly seat (Penaga) will have a straight fight between the BN linchpin, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), and the Islamist opposition Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). Penaga was slated for a three-cornered contest until the candidate from Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia's (Bersatu) was disqualified on nomination day. Bersatu (also known as PPBM) is part of PH led by former premier Mahathir Mohamad. PH does not, however, include PAS.

### **Malay-Dominant Constituencies: The Three-cornered Contest**

In Malay-dominant constituencies, where the Malay community is more than 60% of the total population, there will be an intense battle between UMNO, PH, and PAS. The marginal parliamentary seat of Balik Pulau is one to watch. In 2008, PKR won the seat against UMNO with just 50.2% of the vote. In 2013, UMNO regained the seat from PKR with just 51.1% of the vote.

UMNO's candidate Hilmi Yahya was a former deputy health minister with an established presence in Balik Pulau. He was also the Member of Parliament (MP) for the seat in 2004. The fact that he is originally from Balik Pulau also made him more appealing to his constituents. What is more, since PAS severed ties with its former opposition coalition partners, it is expected to split the votes that may have otherwise gone to PKR. These factors have forced PKR into a double disadvantage in Balik Pulau.

In mainland Penang, the parliamentary seat Tasek Gelugor will see a battle between UMNO, PAS, and Bersatu. Unlike the situation in Balik Pulau, the multi-cornered fight in Tasek Gelugor might not be advantageous to UMNO. In 2013, UMNO candidate Shabudin Yahaya won 50.8% of the vote against PAS (44.5%) – with a difference of only 3, 042 votes.

Bersatu is expected to leverage on its association with Dr Mahathir to attract UMNO supporters to the opposition. What is more, the fact that Bersatu is operating within PH should enable it to win the overwhelming majority of the Chinese vote, who make up roughly 15% of voters in Tasek Gelugor.

The Chinese community had previously voted for PAS for similar reasons, but will likely hand their vote to Bersatu this time round. Bersatu should theoretically split the vote with UMNO and PAS, though it is difficult to accurately predict how the party will perform since GE14 is the party's first election.

### **Chinese-Dominant Constituencies: Old and New Parties**

Newer parties such as the Malaysian United Party (MU), the Penang Front Party (PFP), the revived Party Rakyat Malaysia (PRM), and Parti Cinta Negara are mainly contesting in Chinese majority seats. This is because they are Chinese-dominant parties. Historically, Penang's Chinese community has voted along party lines, rather than for the candidate per se. It thus remains uncertain, and indeed unlikely, that they will vote for a new party which they are not familiar with.

Nevertheless, at the state level, dark horse candidates may give established parties a run for their money. In the Sungai Pinang state seat, there will be a tight contest between six candidates: five from PAS, BN, PH, Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM), and MU, as well as one independent candidate. PSM's candidate, Teh Yee Cheu is a popular environmental activist. He previously contested in the Tanjong Bunga state seat under the DAP banner and had won 65.8% of the vote. He left DAP in October 2017.

The PH's candidate for Sungai Pinang is the incumbent Lim Siew Khim. She won the seat with 60.5% in 2013. The fact that she will be running against a former colleague

as well as four other candidates creates significant uncertainty over how the popular vote will be split in GE14.

### **New Factor?**

Additionally, the emergence of new parties such as MU should not be neglected. MU will be contesting in four parliamentary seats and 20 state seats in GE14. The party has been operating in Penang since 2016. It has a presence in Kebun Bunga, Padang Kota, Dato Keramat, Air Itam, and Tanjung, and it has focused on engaging in social work with the community.

The impact this may have on the ability of PH candidates to define their seats should not be underestimated. Their grassroots activities not only create sufficient party awareness, but also build their credibility as a viable alternative. That said, the extent of MU's popularity is difficult to gauge because it has shied away from media attention.

Although PH is largely expected to retain Penang, the multi-cornered contests in the state have increased the uncertainty of PH's goal to take over the federal government. While Penang will likely remain a 'safe deposit' state, the plethora of multi-cornered contests are a reflection of the broader challenges the opposition faces to attain this goal across Malaysia.

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