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Malaysia's Semenyih By-Election: What Next for Race-based Politics?

By Johan Saravanamuttu

SYNOPSIS

With the loss of the Semenyih by-election in Selangor state by the ruling Pakatan Harapan, what are the implications for race-based politics in Malaysia? The trajectory of UMNO-PAS collaboration is likely to move the Barisan Nasional coalition, now in the opposition, in this direction.

COMMENTARY

THE SELANGOR state by-election of Semenyih held on 2 March 2019 saw the ruling Pakatan Harapan (PH) losing by a margin of 1,914 votes to the opposition Barisan Nasional (BN). This has been touted by analysts as a major blow to the 10-month-old PH government led by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Just prior to this, on 26 January, in another by-election in Cameron Highlands, the PH coalition also failed to win.

However, in four previous by-elections prior to the Cameron Highlands outcome, PH had come out victorious. Most significantly, the Semenyih by-election has seen the upping of the ante of Malaysia's race-based coalition politics.

Broader Factors

The Semenyih contest saw BN candidate Zakaria Hanafi from United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) win the four-cornered fight with a majority of 1,914 votes, defeating the candidate from Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) Muhammad Aiman Zainali. Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM)'s candidate Nik Aziz Afiq Abdul and independent Kuan Chee Heng both lost their deposits. In the 14th General Election (GE14), Bersatu's Bakhtiar Mohd Nor, Muhammad Aiman's father-in-law, had won the seat handily with 23,428 votes.

All the reasons and analyses given so far by pundits for PH's loss were not necessarily wrong but they mostly focused on specific reasons such as its poor candidate, PH electoral promises not being fulfilled, the strong BN campaign, local issues not addressed, to name a few. However, there were broader factors behind the result.

The evidence seems to point to a swing in the voting, suggesting that a crucial number of fence sitters shifted towards BN. Secondly, there is more than enough anecdotal evidence to suggest that PAS voters by and large migrated to UMNO as their party of choice. PAS leaders openly stated their intention to support UMNO despite Mahathir claiming that PAS president "Tok Guru" Hadi Awang intimidated to him otherwise.

If one were to advance the hypothesis that the Islamist party and its voters threw their weight behind BN's UMNO candidate, one should be able to show if the numbers add up by comparing the outcomes of GE14 and the by-election. Data from the Election Commission show that BN/PAS together gained a 4 percent increase in support in contrast to PH's slippage of 5.2 percent.

This would suggest that 'fence sitters' could have contributed to PH's loss with disaffection towards PH contributing some 4-5 percent to the swing of votes. The lower turnout rate in the by-election may have also benefited BN as out-of-town voters were likely to be PH supporters.

Shifting Ground

	PH	BN	PAS	No. of Voters	Turnout (%)
GE14	50.8	31.3	15.1	46,151	88.0
By-election	45.6	50.4	-	38,218	73.3

Source: Election Commission

A More Racial Turn?

If this analysis is accepted then the basis of Malaysian coalition politics has clearly become a more race-based contestation, seeing the conjoining of two Malay-based parties in BN. The change was sealed on 5 March and there is already talk of having a common logo for UMNO and PAS in the next general election.

While in GE14 PAS was perceived and received by voters to be in opposition to BN, it is now openly in coalition with UMNO, in opposition to the PH government. That said, the overall basis of coalition politics in Peninsular Malaysia, which has generally been communal, remains one of getting optimum support from its three major ethnic groups.

In Semenyih, which had a 68 percent Malay majority, with minorities of 16% Chinese and 14% Indians, winning the Malay vote was crucial. In GE14, PAS split UMNO's share of the Malay vote and caused BN's defeat. In the by-election, PAS openly backed UMNO. Thus for Bersatu to win, it had to garner a larger proportion of the Malay vote than before but it suffered a slippage rather than a gain.

The reasons for this boiled down to the PH federal and state governments not being sufficiently attuned to Malay and local needs.

Takeaways from Semenyih

The first takeaway from Semenyih is the bad news for PH that UMNO remains a force to be reckoned with – albeit with PAS support – close to a year after GE14. The new factor of open UMNO-PAS collaboration is likely to move ahead despite protests from MCA and MIC leaders who have called for a “New Alliance”.

A PAS-UMNO pact could mean continued losses for PH parties in high majority Malay seats where PH is vulnerable. Coalition politics would take on a more ethnic turn. Politics within BN has already turned more sharply racial with its secretary general Nazri Aziz telling its non-Malay partners, MCA and MIC, to just leave the BN if they are unhappy with UMNO’s cooperation with PAS.

Nazri made these remarks during the by-election campaign calling for the reinstating of Malay privileges and the abolishing of Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools, which he later denied. The trajectory of UMNO-PAS collaboration would mean a new political divide of a ruling multiethnic coalition versus a Malay-Islamic coalition with pregnant implications for politics in the Borneo states.

Finally, there is the prospect, in the upcoming Rantau by-election in Negri Sembilan, of another UMNO win unless PH responds appropriately to its Semenyih defeat with an impeccable Parti Keadilan Nasional (PKR) candidate and as a responsive government in power. In the next month, PH would have to show to Rantau voters that it is delivering on its multiple electoral promises but more crucially to also address local issues.

PH would appear to stand a chance of winning this Negri Sembilan seat as it has a slim Malay majority of 52 percent. Conversely, its candidate would likely face the acting UMNO president Mohamad Hasan, the incumbent since 2004, who is a ‘local boy’.

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