

Tenang - the Normandy for Pakatan
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ANALYSIS The Tenang by-election, the fourteenth after the last general election, will be held on Jan 30. Its result would not affect the power structure in the Johor state assembly as BN currently holds 49 out of 56 seats, with DAP and PAS controlling the other four and two seats respectively.

The lawmaker that will replace the late Sulaiman Taha from Umno probably would not serve more than one year as BN is gearing up for an early general election, expected in the next year.

However, in term of political impact, Tenang is the Normandy for Pakatan which could overturn the current political scenario and put the opposition fraternity back on track in its march towards Putrajaya.

Pakatan is now trapped in its worst situation ever since the last general election. The purported chaos in PKR's unprecedented direct party election magnified by the pro-BN mainstream media, and compounded by Zaid Ibrahim's resignation from PKR, had eroded public confidence in the party and the Pakatan coalition.

BN's victory in the previous three by-elections - Batu Sapi, Galas and Hulu Selangor - with the latter two showing a steady flow of rural voters returning to BN, is another real cause of alarm for the opposition coalition.

Although Pakatan was quick to revive its momentum and rebuild its image through the show of unity and the unveiling of its 10 reform pledges in the second Pakatan convention in Penang, like it or not, Tenang will be seen as the indicator of whether Pakatan will manage to crawl out of the current doldrums.

Golden opportunity

On a positive note, this by-election is also a golden opportunity for Pakatan to prove otherwise.

Firstly, although it was traditionally contested by Umno, Tenang is one of the two state seats under the Labis parliamentary constituency which is held by MCA.

Labis was represented by former MCA president Ling Liong Sik for four terms since 1986. It was then inherited by Johor MCA strongman Chua Soi Lek (right) in the 2004 general election. The seat was subsequently passed on to his son Tee Yong in the 2008 general election after Soi Lek's infamous sex DVD scandal erupted.

However, the father made a formidable comeback earlier this year and was elected as MCA president. Subsequently, the son was made a deputy minister despite being a newcomer to politics and the MCA.

Being the political base of two MCA presidents and the stepping stone for the party's rising star into the government, Tenang's importance to MCA is undeniable.

Secondly, from the composition and locality of the voters, Tenang is a typical rural mixed constituency. According to the electoral roll released in June this year, it has a total of 14,592 voters with 7,042 or 48.26 percent Malays, 5,635 or 38.62 percent Chinese and 1,754 or 12.02 percent Indians.

This kind of constituency was the lifebelt that kept BN afloat in the 2008 political tsunami, but its majority in these seats, including Tenang, was reduced significantly.

However, the previous few by-elections namely Hulu Selangor, Batu Sapi and Galas suggested that BN had regained its lost ground in these areas. Pakatan needs to prove in Tenang that this is not a nationwide trend.

BN's last fortress

Thirdly, Johor is deemed as BN's last fortress in the peninsula. To Umno, this is where the Malay nationalist party was born; to MCA, this is their last refuge in the 2008 general election.

Generally, Johorians are comparatively more conservative and apolitical. The grassroots organisation of the opposition in the state is weak. They could only secure six state seats in the political tsunami that swept the other states.

Pakatan could kill many birds with one stone if it could reduce BN's 2,492 majority in Tenang or create an unexpected victory. It would contain BN's rising momentum and Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak would have to think twice before calling a snap polls, giving Pakatan more time to prepare for it.

Should Pakatan increase its Chinese votes, Soi Lek would be the biggest casualty. His authority in the party would be threatened. It may even prompt a domino effect among Johor Chinese voters and open up a floodgate in the BN's southern fortress. The damage that Tenang would inflict to Johor BN would be no less than that caused by Sibu to Sarawak BN.

Although this seat had traditionally been contested, and lost, by the PAS, Tenang's mixed demographics is an unfamiliar territory for the party.

Given the circumstances, Pakatan could consider fielding a non-PAS candidate. After all, PAS can be reassigned the seat again in the future if necessary.

Unlike the northern states, PAS' Islamic ideology has shown much influence in Johor. The Felda settlements in Tenang have always been BN's staunch supporters where less than 20 percent of voters in these areas supported PAS in the 2008 polls. Furthermore, Johor Malays have a strong sentimental affinity to Umno. It is almost impossible for PAS to shore up their Malay support.

On the other hand, PAS secured only slightly more than half of Chinese votes in the 2008 polls. The number of votes secured was lower than the Labis parliamentary votes that went to the DAP candidate.

The split voting pattern shows that there is still room for the opposition to garner support, especially Chinese voters in the Labis town area who are more accessible to alternative information on the Internet and young voters working in cities.

Winning formula

The winning formula for Pakatan would be retaining Malay votes while boosting the Chinese support. Fielding a PAS candidate obviously is not the best choice.

What if Pakatan picks a Chinese candidate from DAP? It would probably turn out to be Pakatan's biggest weakness as all three seats - Labis and the two state seats under it - would be contested by Chinese DAP candidates. Pakatan would scare away even more Malay voters.

It is arguable that this scenerio would suit the multiethnic PKR better. This could convince Chinese fence-sitters who are reluctant to support PAS while minimising the adverse effect among Malay voters.

In other words, PAS would not be able to draw the potential Chinese votes; DAP could do the opposite but it would jeopardise Malay votes; while PKR could serve as the bridge.

Some may think this argument is too ethnic-oriented but the fact remains that most Johoreans are still driven by ethnic considerations as a result of BN domination for over half a century.

However, even if Pakatan has the best candidate coupled with favourable external factors, the most important factor would remain the cooperation between the three parties as well as within each party. Rivals in the PKR party polls must close ranks, while the Johor DAP leadership and the party central leadership need to put aside their ongoing differences.

- Bernama

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