

**Machap - lessons for both MCA and DAP**  
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Are there lessons from Machap? Absolutely. This by-election was not business as usual. While on the surface, Machap was a feather in the cap for the Barisan Nasional (BN), who decisively and unsurprisingly won this by-election in an area that it has dominated for decades, there are interesting and important undercurrents at play.

BN's romp to victory should not be celebrated, nor should the marginal dent that the opposition made in the BN majority. While neither of us were on the ground in this heated by-election, our analysis of the polling station results points to challenges for both BN, especially MCA, and the opposition in future elections.

It's important to step back and look at Machap, not just as a political arena, but for what it represents for larger Malaysia. It has been in the heartland of support for BN.

This state seat in the parliamentary constituency of Alor Gajah is one of MCA's traditional safe areas. The parliamentary seat is held by MCA vice-president and Human Resource Minister Dr Fong Chan Onn.

It was previously represented by Melaka MCA strongman Poh Ah Tiam, who contested and won his first election in the state seat of Pulau Sebang in the 1986 elections and retained this seat in the 1990 elections (winning 62% and 71% of the popular vote respectively).

After the constituency delimitation in 1994, Poh contested in the newly created seat of Bukit Sedanan in the 1995 elections which he retained in the 1999 elections (with 78% and 66% of the popular vote respectively). Bukit Sedanan was renamed Machap after the 2003 constituency delimitation exercise (with little change to its overall ethnic composition) and Poh again, easily retained this seat with almost 83% of the popular vote.

As a semi-rural seat, it is also malleable to BN campaign promises of increased patronage. Semi-rural areas typically are in need of infrastructure and it comes as no surprise that BN went all out in its promises for development to woo voters.

It is also no surprise that these promises were effective, as they were in the Ketari by-election in 2002. The parallels are striking. Machap has the similar composition, with two new villages (Machap Baru and Machap Umbu) which are Chinese majority areas surrounded by small Malay-majority kampongs and housing/Felda developments.

Machap is also a 'mixed' constituency where no one ethnic group comprises a majority of voters. As Table 1 (see below) shows, it is divided into eight polling stations, of which two are Chinese majority, four are Malay majority and two are mixed. According to the Election Commission (EC), the latest electoral roll showed a constituency that was made up of 45% Chinese, 38% Malay, 15% Indian and 2% Others.

There was little change in the ethnic composition of this constituency from the 2004 elections to the 2007 by-election, with the exception of a slight decrease of 266 in the number of registered voters from 9,889 in 2004 to 9,623 in 2007.

Machap was not only a political bell-weather, it also typifies the type of constituency that BN

will have to retain nationally to hold on to its 2/3rd majority and the opposition will have to pick up if it is to make any headway.

### **Underlying challenges**

BN won hands-down. When the results were released, the opposition only managed to reduce the majority by 481 votes, from 4,562 (62.2%) in 2004 to 4,081 (58.4%) in the 2007 by-election. DAP marginally increased its percentage of the popular vote share from a dismal 17.5% in 2004 to a still not impressive 20.8%, a small increase of a meager 3.3%. They did it in the context of less voters coming to the polls, as voter turnout dropped 1.6% from 72.6% to 74.2% compared to the 2004 contest.

The minimal reduction in the overall BN majority was surprising given that many commentators and analysts have claimed a widespread disenchantment among the Chinese community because of recent price hikes as well as undelivered election promises to fight corruption, just to name a few.

Indeed, a recent poll by the Merdeka Centre that was reported by malaysiakini, showed an increasing willingness among Chinese voters to vote for opposition parties, much to the worry of the Chinese-based parties in the BN.

While MCA's fears of being 'abandoned' by Chinese voters might have been assuaged in this by-election, an analysis of the polling station results reveals trends which are not so reassuring.

They lost support in Chinese areas. Not a lot, but more than in other areas. In one of the two Chinese majority new villages, Machap Baru, the percentage of votes won by DAP increased from 21.6% to 36.6%, an increase of 15%. In the other Chinese majority new village of Machap Umbu, the percentage of votes won by DAP held steady at 38.1%. In the mixed polling district of Ayer Pasir, the percentage of votes won by DAP increased from 14.2% to 19.4%, an increase of 5.2%.

The inability of the overwhelming BN machinery in terms of positive media coverage, promises of land titles and government spending as well as its electoral spending advantage to increase its share of the overall Chinese votes in Machap Umbu and to prevent the increase in DAP support in Machap Baru points to a tough battle ahead at the polls. BN faces the challenge of keeping Chinese support, even in its "safe" areas.

The Machap results also show that there isn't significant new support coming into BN. Younger voters did not embrace BN in a substantive manner compared to the 2004 polls. This points to another challenge for BN. If it hopes to maintain its majority of seats, it will need to win greater support from the influx of new voters. They will be decisive in the next national polls.

In the five polling stations which have more than one saluran (or streams) there was no consistent pattern of support for BN among younger voters. No party significantly won more of the younger voters. Only in the polling station of Machap Baru was there a discernible difference in the percentage of support for DAP.

There the percentage of support for DAP in the older saluran was 31.4% compared to a 37.5% support for DAP in the younger saluran (a difference of 6.1%). This difference in voting patterns between the older and younger saluran in Machap Baru increased in the

2007 by-election (from a 3.5% difference in 2004 to a 6.1% difference in the by-election), suggesting that younger voters are more likely to vote for the opposition in areas where the opposition makes gains.

Of course, one must take care not to generalise from the results from one polling district, but uncovering the underlying reasons for this difference in support and inability of BN to woo young voters in critical areas is important for both MCA as well as DAP, if it wants to 'capture' a significant proportion of the hearts and minds of younger voters. Across the board, the parties need to think carefully about how to reach out to new voters on the rolls. Neither an appeal on issues or patronage promises is effectively appealing to new voters.

### **Apathy and disengagement**

One of the key challenges of reaching new voters is actually getting them to participate in the process. The number of registered voters in Machap actually decreased by 266 from the 2004 elections to the 2007 by-election. All things being equal, the number of registered voters in a seat should experience a steady increase over time as a greater number of citizens become eligible to register and hence vote, especially considering Malaysia's demographic trends.

Even accounting for possible out-migration in search of employment, the drop in voters in Machap suggests fewer voters are registering. Some may feel that the electoral process is not fair, or after the failures of the reformasi movement to bring about change, that participation cannot bring change.

Others may feel that BN may not offer adequate incentives for participation, considering that parties have relatively limited options for young people, especially Chinese parties in BN. The causes of the disengagement can only be speculated, but the fact that young people are disengaging suggests greater apathy, and is worrying for the vibrancy of the electoral process in Malaysia in the future. It did not help that EC scheduled the election on a week day, essentially disenfranchising workers who are stationed outside of Machap.

Machap suggests that voter turnout was especially low in Chinese areas. The overall lower turnout in Chinese areas contributed to lower BN majority. Some traditional BN supporters chose to stay home rather than vote for the opposition. Turnout in Chinese majority areas dropped from 210 and 139 voters in the two respective polling stations.

The decrease in turnout in Chinese areas is concentrated in Machap Baru and Machap Umbu. In contrast, the turnout in Malay areas remained consistent. This highlights that DAP was not able to win over disenchanted voters, who chose to stay home than to go to the polls. MCA has to address the task of how to win these disengaged voters back.

Part of the mobilisation challenge is that many people in semi-urban constituencies don't actually live where they vote anymore. Mobilisation efforts are critical in all elections, but especially in by-elections in constituencies where voters often work and live outside of the area. In this case it has been suggested that at many as 25% of the voters do not reside in Machap.

The MCA primarily opted for incentives and DAP relied on the appeal of its message, with MCA more successful. MCA will not have the resources to use this campaign method in the general elections. MCA cannot take for granted that issue-based campaigning on the part of DAP will not be as ineffective without the resources to balance their message in the next

polls.

As the Sarawak polls last May showed, issue-based campaigning can be especially effective in urban areas, which remain vulnerable for BN, especially the Chinese-based parties. For its part, DAP has to ascertain if its message hit home. Clearly, it did not resonate all that loudly considering its limited paltry gains. The issues of fuel hikes and tolls prices are almost irrelevant in semi-rural areas that are relatively shielded from inflationary pressures of urban life.

DAP only increased its votes overall in the by-election by 167 votes. In Malay areas, DAP's support was an abysmal 9.1% - the exact same percentage of the 2004 elections. Less than 10% of voters in Malay areas voted for the opposition.

On the one hand, this suggests that BN as a whole did not lose support in the Malay community, but simultaneously did not pick up support. Considering the effort that BN has placed in the larger context to increase distribution toward the Malay community in the 9th Malaysia Plan, including staunchly defending the New Economic Policy (NEP), the by-election results have not yielded additional support. BN faces the challenge of maintaining support among the Malays in a national contest when resources will be more spread thin.

Yet, equally salient, it highlights the minimal level of support that DAP has in Malay-majority areas and the limits of its message for this community. DAP has tried to reach the Malay ground through Anwar Ibrahim. Despite Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) playing a role in the campaign - including at least one day of Anwar campaigning on the ground - DAP did not make any gains. Machap shows that Anwar has yet to provide the means to forge broad inter-ethnic support for the opposition.

### **Opposition's hurdles**

The difficulty in crossing ethnic divisions in voting draws attention to larger points of the problems of the opposition working together. The opposition is divided between the secular DAP on one pole and the Islamist PAS on the other. PKR has tried to bridge the gap between the two with limited success. Illustrative is the misconstruing of a statement by a PKR Chinese member in the ceramah saying that a vote for DAP is a vote for the opposition which includes PKR and PAS.

BN characterised this as a pact among opposition political parties, namely DAP and PAS, and tried to tap into the emotionally-laden and ideological divide between secular and Islamists. This old practice - rooted in the famous tengkolok picture of the 1990 election - appears to have had a minimum effect on the actual results in Machap.

Clearly some voters treated this form of campaigning with skepticism in the post-reformasi environment. But its effect may be deeper. It creates suspicion and distrust within the opposition as a whole, limiting the ability to forge a multi-ethnic and inclusive alternative. It adds to the hurdle that the opposition already faces at the polls.

The by-election also brought to the fore the problem of seat allocation among the opposition. With PKR elites having ties to this constituency through contesting in the parliamentary seat in 1999 and the party aiming to reach out to more Chinese voters, the waters muddied before the by-election began.

It was not clear from the outset how much PKR would support DAP, and in turn what they

get from any support. This level of uncertainty bred caution and limited cooperation. The hurdle of cooperation is on top of hurdles in the electoral process as a whole, where the opposition has less resources and less access to the media.

With this challenging ground ahead, what then are the lessons of Machap? BN and MCA in particular cannot take its success for granted. DAP did pick up votes in Chinese areas when the MCA concentrated all of its energies and resources on the by-election.

DAP also cannot assume that the Sarawak tide can be replicated on the peninsular, especially in semi-urban mixed seats. All the parties will face not only the battle of winning support but the imperative of getting people registered and to turn out at the polls. They have to harness their campaigning more effectively.

Central to all the gains will be cooperation among parties. BN has the benefit of strong cooperation within the coalition framework. The opposition in contrast has to address its internal divisions and suspicions. With Ijok looming, the challenge of opposition cohesion is immediately apparent as highlighted by the debates surrounding candidate selection within PKR and the balancing of different opinions on cooperation among the opposition parties.

In Machap, DAP called the shots and did not make significant gains. Looking ahead, the key issue is whether PKR calling the shots can actually make a difference in opposition fortunes.

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