

Ghosts, goblins and goodies in Galas
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In this large rural constituency of Kelantan, the mood appears calm. The by-election has gotten off to a slow start, with limited posters and modest turnout at ceramahs, where enterprising Kelantanese entrepreneurs and outside supporters outnumber the local crowds.

NONEFrom the onset, there is a sense of fatigue as the 12th by-election in two years unfolds. All sides say the contest in this traditional Umno seat is close, but given the small PAS majority of 646 votes - less than 10 percent - and the resource edge that gives the BN weight in such a concentrated by-election, the BN has the advantage.

The bottom line is that Umno needs the victory more, and if they lose the contest, it will be the result of their own internal squabbling.

A Malay heartland

Before outlining the five main factors that will shape the result, allow me to introduce some of the key features of this 'ulu' constituency in the heartland of West Malaysia. Galas is overwhelmingly rural, with limited access to many of its most remote areas, especially among the Orang Asli communities.

The intensive development of government infrastructure around Gua Musang town has increased the number of civil servants, who join the majority local Malay community - engaged in rubber production and small businesses - as voters.

There are two small pockets of Chinese voters, concentrated in the new village of Pulai comprised largely of Hakka, and in the town, which includes a combination of Hokkien and Hakka voters. The Chinese Malaysians are engaged in farming, small business, and importantly, saw-milling as the area undergoes massive environmental change with its nearby forests all but depleted.

azlanLorries clog the roads coming into the town, filled with Malaysia's remaining logs as the sales fill someone's pockets. The sheer beauty of the landscape - the wonderful rock formations, river streams and dense vegetation - complements the warm hospitality of the local communities who welcome you into their homes without hesitation, similar to the era of old Malaysia.

Galas in many ways represents this blend of the new and the old, the development of modern infrastructure and services, including a new sports stadium opened just two days before nomination, and rural concerns over land.

Traditional kampong houses co-exist with pockets of wealthier housing developments, especially near the route south to Cameron Highlands. Despite its remoteness, the area is connected, with highway access north to Kota Bharu and south to Perak.

The town is wired, although Internet use beyond the town center is sparse. With a young population, voters under 40 comprise 43 percent of the electorate (almost half), there is also concern with jobs and salaries, as average wages range from RM500 for labourers to RM2,500 for civil servants.

Those under 30 comprise 19 percent. The ethnic blend of this constituency – 61.5 percent Malays, 19.7 percent Chinese, 17 percent Orang Asli, 1.5 percent Indian and 0.3 percent Others – showcases the diversity of the rural heartland.

It many ways, this large constituency is a fitting fight for the country's heartland between two traditional rivals, PAS and Umno.

Ghost of 46 and Umno 'win-win' dynamic

NONE In one of the enclaves near town there is a stone representing the spirit of 46. It is now faded, but the sentiment it represents persists. Gua Musang is Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah's political base. It is where he launched the splinter party of 46 and where he continues to be the political conscience of Umno, fighting for a return to statesmanship and honour for the party.

Ku Li, as he is fondly known in the constituency, has been seen as an advocate for Kelantan and for a better Umno. For his individuality and his principles, he is resented. It is clear that there are those in Umno who want him gone and some see this as an opportunity to kill him off.

NONETHis by-election is a test for this veteran politician, as a victory for Umno and for his chosen candidate will signal that he can deliver for the party when it is needed. The daggers from behind are out, however, as even a little movement in the voters can lead to a loss – a fact that is not lost among those who see this by-election as an opportunity to silence the voice of dissent.

It is no wonder that many Umno leaders are confident in Galas. Either option is a 'win'. If they win the polls then they can build momentum and break the stalemate between Pakatan Rakyat and Umno, adding one to the BN side. If they lose the contest, then, at last, the leader of spirit of 46 will no longer be a force for change from within.

This contest is a 'win-win' for Umno. For Ku Li, it is another chance to show his national relevancy as a leader.

Oil goblin and PAS 'lose-lose' dynamic

It is important to understand that Galas is not a PAS stronghold. This state seat victory was part of the 2008 tsunami, and part of the PAS pick-up as part of the opposition in mixed seats.

The deceased state assemblyman was ill and did not build up the grassroots for the party over the last two years. This contest, like Manek Urai in 2009, will not affect the balance of power in Kelantan.

Thus, it is not a surprise that the PAS campaign lacks focus and drive. There is a noticeable lack of local leadership as PAS' faithful have come in to be the worker bees for the contest, with limited connections locally.

More substantively, this is another test in a multi-ethnic seat, similar to Bagan Pinang. It will test the party's ability to cooperate with its coalition partners and its strength in non-Malay areas. It is a test of how comfortable the party is with a multi-ethnic umbrella in the rural settings.

NONEThere is a sense that PAS, like the rest of Pakatan, are repeating the same message – change – without clear substantive messages to the voters. The messages are ad-hoc, without a clear framework. They are almost as stale as the development mantras and chorus of '19 years is enough' that Umno has adopted.

The focus is on winning protest votes, not necessarily new voters connected to positive messages. Few realise that the time for rhetoric for Pakatan has passed, as increasingly more voters want a clear picture of how the ideals are to be translated into substance. The voters want the spirit of change and campaign promises to be realised.

To realise the development goals, many at the state level in Kelantan PAS know they need money. This is where the oil goblin comes in – they want the royalty. Razaleigh has been the strongest advocate for the oil royalty for the state. PAS has been careful not to attack him directly as they know they still need his support.

NONEWhile the climate has changed with the new sultan, who is seen not to be supportive of Razaleigh as he is seen to be aligned to others in the royal camp, the fact remains that this impoverished state needs resources. PAS in Kelantan has benefitted from leaders within Umno such as Kelantan party chief Mustapha Mohamed and Razaleigh, who have not ignored the state's interest.

For PAS, the election is a 'lose-lose' dynamic. A loss for Umno will lose the support of a person who has been in the middle ground and been concerned for national and state interests. A loss for PAS has repercussions for its political base in Kelantan.

While a 'deal' is highly unlikely, despite rumours, since it would go against the overall wishes of the leadership and ultimately would be difficult to enforce, PAS has been put into a difficult position. A close result will allow all sides to save face.

The gobbling of the goodies

NONEOne factor that is always at play in a by-election is money. The record stream of by-elections has depleted party coffers, but the BN has already shown its financial superiority. It has won the poster war, featuring less-than-flattering photos of Prime Minister Najib Razak and an extremely youthful Razaleigh.

The financial advantage will yield results in this constituency, given the large number of people. In Manek Urai, it contributed to a gain of 1,287 votes, more than 10 percent, in support for the BN. In Galas, it will likely yield more in an even slimmer original majority. Recall that in Manek Urai, the majority was 1,352 originally and this led to the slim win of 65 votes for PAS.

The main reason money will have an impact is that the level of poverty and income disparities are sharp. This is most acute in the Orang Asli community where the offers of goodies will hit home. The votes are value for money unfortunately when compared to the other communities, as comparatively lower level of investment can insure votes.

The real issue that persists is land. Here is where PAS' strength is in the Malay areas and it has been less successful among the Orang Asli communities. Umno is already pushing home the land issue, raising questions about whether the Orang asli communities are being fairly treated. The land issue here is closely connected to development and both the state and national governments share responsibility in this multiple jurisdictions problem.

Both sides are using to land issues in all communities, and all the while small and larger rewards are coming. The development project promises are also part of the equation. Drawing from the swing in Manek Urai, PAS faces an uphill battle managing the flow of goodies. This is despite the call to reduce distribution and vote 'persuasion'.

Youth lean towards BN

The usual national pattern is that younger voters are increasingly voting for Pakatan, especially Malays. Galas appears to be not the norm.

azlanThe younger voters who comprise the deciding votes are concerned with jobs. They want increasing development and opportunities. Many tend increasingly to be leaning toward the BN, which is portraying itself as bringing in more employment and connections, and see Ku Li as part of the answer to their needs.

It is clear that the level of political awareness and connection to Pakatan among Galas youth is much less than in other areas. Here is where the remoteness shapes the terrain. Many young people in Galas are non-political, and are less concerned with political ideals than the economic marketplace. They want the goods, not promises. They are the 'Me Generation', wanting to take advantage of the by-election as much as possible.

What this means is that the usual numerical projections do not offer PAS a boost. Gains in the number of voters here do not necessarily strengthen the chances for the opposition. PAS' support is stronger among older voters where land issues were resolved when it came into power in Kelantan 19 years ago.

Haunting messaging

The BN continues to harp on the same old theme of how long PAS has been in power. Their messages in the campaign so far are stale and similarly inconsistent. The focus has been on a house-to-house campaign, but what they are offering is same old, same old. Voters in Galas are not clearly being offered alternative reasons to consider both sides.

NONEThis is where patronage has increasing salience – why not take the money when there is nothing new – and makes for a staid election. Some say nothing much will change, as the election is viewed as low impact. The only people that are happy are the businesses who are racking in their annual incomes in the short campaign period.

The candidates on both sides have not yet substantively increased the quality of the discussion. PAS candidate Dr Zulkefli Mohamad (above, right) is warm, but non-communicative. He remains shell-shocked in the campaign, uttering few words.

NONEThe Umno candidate's experience in business has made him more articulate, and Abdul Aziz Yusof (in blue shirt) is more comfortable with the media and has offered some ideas, but not consistently. He is seen as Ku Li's choice. Both candidates will be expected to offer more as the campaign progresses, as the contest will not just come down to the party loyalties but candidate performance.

Not an easy choice

Beyond the goodies, the candidates and stale messaging, voters in Galas will decide if they want to strengthen Pakatan or remain committed to their own Umno national leader, Razaleigh.

It is a vote for change from outside or change from within. It is not an easy choice, as doubts exist on all sides about the possibilities of change. Najib this time round has not made the campaign about his leadership, but let a party critic face his own music.

As the campaign evolves and gains momentum, Galas voters will decide who offers the most in a contest that for many in the constituency is not clearly seen as part of the national picture. Whether it is the ghost, the goblin or the goodies that play out is still yet to be seen, but all are at play as this campaign evolves.

My money is on the goodies, a close result and ultimately a BN victory.

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