

Malay votes decisive for PKR
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analysis No party is more dependent on the outcome of the general elections than Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). Formed a decade ago in the wake of the reformasi protests against the ousting of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, PKR must gain electoral ground or risk being labeled "irrelevant".

In 2004, a wave of optimism for newly-minted prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi delivered a crushing defeat to PKR, with party president Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail clinging on to the party's sole parliamentary seat of Permatang Pauh by a razor-thin majority of 590 votes.

Nevertheless, the political ground has shifted drastically in the last four years. Abdullah's popularity has dropped drastically as he is perceived as 'soft' and unable to deliver on his promises to halt corruption and bring necessary reforms.

In urban areas, his administration has come under severe criticism for the big leap in petrol prices, tolls and other basic products. Escalating crime in the face of an inefficient police force has also become a hot topic among voters. BN has also lost support among Indian and Chinese voters for its tacit support for legal precedents - allowing Islamic law to undermine the rights of non-Muslims - as well as open threats against non-Malays at Umno meetings.

anwar ceramah in rembau 150208 anwarPKR also received a major boost with the release of Anwar Ibrahim from prison. The veteran politician has been able to strengthen the party machinery and provide a clear policy direction.

In public, Anwar has been wooing massive crowds across the country with his call for change. Loud cheers echo his condemnation of the BN as incompetent and corrupt as he promises to provide free education, lower petrol prices, deliver a minimum monthly wage of RM1,500 to workers and do justice to the Hindraf 5 detained under the Internal Security Act, which allows detention without trial.

With DAP fighting in Chinese-dominated seats and PAS taking the bulk of Malay constituencies, PKR has positioned itself as a multi-ethnic party appealing to a broad spectrum of voters. PKR is running in the Malay heartland states of Kelantan and Terengganu as well as in mixed constituencies in the west coast.

Seats targeted by PKR

seats targeted by pkr in kelantan and terengganuPKR candidates contesting 13 parliament and 23 state seats in Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu. Should there be a 5% swing among Malay voters, PKR can hope to pick up four parliament seats - Machang, Tanah Merah and Ketereh (Kelantan) and Dungun (Terengganu).

In the west coast, PKR is expected to retain Permatang Pauh in Penang. And with a 5% swing among Malays and Chinese, coupled with a massive swing among Indian voters, it is possible for PKR to win up to nine seats in Kedah (Kulim Bandar Baharu and Padang Serai), Penang (Nibong Tebal), Perak (Sungai Siput and Tapah), Selangor (Subang and Kapar) and

Kuala Lumpur (Batu and Lembah Pantai).

Although faced with massive majorities, top PKR leaders could also create upsets elsewhere. These seats include Gopeng (Dr Lee Boon Chye, majority 14,260), Gombak (Azmin Ali, majority 13,207), Pandan (Syed Shahir Syed Mohamud, majority 14,112), Bandar Tun Razak (Khalid Ibrahim) and Teluk Kemang (Kamarul Bharin Abbas, majority 17,777).

Nevertheless, none of the battles will come easily.

BN will be focused on denying PKR and Anwar any inroads in Malaysian politics. BN's machinery will swamp the marginal constituencies to drown out PKR's campaign. They will also be reminding voters that only BN elected representatives will receive development allocations up to RM2 million a year, a severe punishment for those who vote for the opposition.

The key to PKR's victory will be Malay voters. If they come around to accepting PKR's premise that bumiputera privileges under the New Economic Policy is only benefitting the Umno elite, and if they are prepared to abandon their dependence on Umno, they will trigger a political tsunami that could permanently change the country's political landscape.

By winning at least 10 parliament seats in the peninsula, as well as perhaps an equal number in Sabah and Sarawak, the party can gain the much-needed political momentum, and along with its opposition allies, be able to position itself to mount a credible challenge for government in 2013.

That's the best case scenario. And achieving it will be a tall order for PKR.

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