

**Some dents in southern BN strongholds**  
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analysis MCPX From the bustling town of Seremban and breezy Kuantan to Umno's homeland in Muar, the southern states of Negri Sembilan, Johor, Malacca and Pahang have been safely in the Barisan Nasional's hands. This round - it is likely that they will remain so.

The opposition, however, will potentially make important inroads into these areas, as outlooks and conditions have changed even in the BN strongholds. The impact will be felt in a handful of increasingly competitive seats, from Rasah, Teluk Kemang and Jasin to Skudai, Raub and Kuantan.

The national story of why the ground has shifted has been told elsewhere. The reasons for increased support for the opposition are well-known, from prices to unfulfilled promises. Yet in these stronghold states of the BN, there are some marked differences at play. It is in these areas where the test of the power of the opposition as a national force will be assessed.

It is important to step back and assess why these areas have been so strong for the BN. Historically, Malacca and Negri Sembilan were among the most competitive states electorally, with the DAP in particular winning seats in the urban cities of Malacca and Seremban. While the DAP has slated strong candidates in their historical strongholds, conditions have changed.

Kota Melaka remains highly competitive, pitting dynamic lawyer Wong Nai Chee (right) against the hard-working DAP state party chairman Sim Tong Him in a contest where the MCA is going all out to win and backing its candidate with its formidable machinery and the squabbling within Malacca DAP has eased with the common focus on gaining electoral ground. Yet, the traditional urban competitive seats are not as easy as they once were.

The reason is simple - they are more multi-ethnic in composition. Seremban has completely changed through gerrymandering and Malay urban migration. Kota Melaka also has an increased number of Malay voters.

The reality is that race remains the most powerful identity marker underlying voting behaviour in Malaysia, despite the increased complexity of the Malaysian electorate. In these urban seats, the DAP needs to reach out to the Malay electorate effectively. To do so, its needs support from its opposition partners, notably PKR.

For the BN, the ability to work together as a coalition will determine the success in these seats, and gives it an advantage. This time round, however, the multi-ethnicity in a few of these seats may also give the opposition an advantage, especially in seats within Indian voters. Rasah is a good example.

The opposition has slated a strong candidate with a proven record of quality service, Anthony Loke (photo), making DAP's chances stronger than ever.

**Greater BN unity**

In these southern states, the BN has the advantage in that the coalition is comparatively less fragmented on the ground. Voters have a stronger identification with the BN as the BN, not as individual component parties. In the wonderful Sikh Temple in Johor Bahru, the community there raises concerns about ethnic representation that are echoed in the Klang Valley.

Yet, they see the BN as a voice for their concerns to a greater degree than is echoed elsewhere. A history of good race relations and stronger multi-ethnic cooperation in these states, especially in Johor and Pahang, provides for a stronger foundation for BN cooperation.

The majority of seats in Johor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang are mixed seats, and there is a long established record of voting across races for the 'BN', not for individual component parties.

The exception of course is the deep core support for Umno in Johor; Johoreans take pride in supporting their party since it was founded in their state. Yet this is a particular regional factor that is not replicate elsewhere, with perhaps the exception of Kelantan where voters take pride in their independent position of support for PAS.

The BN has based its success in these southern states on multi-ethnic cooperation, and it is thus not surprising that the local campaign posters and pamphlets are almost exclusively BN-centric. Yet, where the BN has been riddled with infighting, the opposition will make headway.

In Pahang, the level of infighting within Umno (over whether the seat of Kuantan should have been allocated to Umno), and within the component parties (in this case the MCA over the dropping of a popular hard-working Teruntum state assemblyman Ti Lian Ker), now makes the seat more vulnerable than ever before.

Similarly in Labis (Johor), where Chua Soi Lek's son Chua Tee Yong has been slated, divisions within the MCA make this tradition seat more competitive (although difficult to win). The relationships within the BN on the ground have become more strained in Kulai, as well, the seat of MCA president Ong Ka Ting (left).

### **The Hindraf factor**

Nowhere, however, is it clearer that strains are evident in the BN, than where the MIC has its base. Umno MIC relations are frayed. Teluk Kemang (Negri Sembilan) should remain in the hands of the MIC, given the S Sothinathan faced suspension for defending Indian rights in the BN and has the full backing of his party.

Yet, here, the undertones about Hindraf, position of the Indian community within Malaysia and S Samy Vellu's weakened leadership fester and cause strain. The MIC cannot rely on the Umno machinery to secure the Malay voters to the same degree as in the past. The same is true for Umno in relying on non-Malay support. Even in Rembau (Negri Sembilan), where powerful Khairy Jamaluddin is running, his alienation of non-Malays in his discourse as an Umno leader has fostered 'slow' non-Umno machinery.

For the most part, the support for the opposition is not the result of a stronger opposition in these areas. Admittedly, the multiracial message of the opposition is more welcoming to many voters, yet the voting in seats affected by BN infighting is negative voting - a vote

against the BN rather than in favour of the opposition. As one local business owner put it in Kuantan - we will send them "one tight slap" to remind the BN that they need to listen to the people. They have made people lose face unnecessary.

The opposition is comparatively weaker in these southern states, slating many unknowns. PAS candidates in Johor lack the experience and position within the party. In fact the most prominent Johorean in PAS, Salahuddin Ayub (left), is contesting in Kubang Kerian in Kelantan.

DAP and PKR face the same weakness, although their slates in Malacca and Negri Sembilan are stronger than in Johor and Pahang, in that the seats have been allocated earlier and many of the candidates have contested in these areas consistently. The weaker position of the opposition translates into less effective machinery, shallow local networks and limited ability to get its message across.

### **Lack of people-power**

These more rural states are comprised of voters where the impact of television and radio, dominated by the BN, has more sway than the Internet and alternative means to influence voters. Here, the lack of people-power for the opposition on the ground weakens their ability to make unknown candidates known.

Importantly, BN's greater financial resources buttress its campaign effort, making these southern states safer and harder to win for the opposition. Where the opposition has a small base and has slated strong candidates - such as in the state seats of Skudai in Johor and Teras in Pahang - they are gaining ground, and the BN is facing possible defeat.

Comparatively, however, voters in these areas have less to grouse about. These states are among those that have most benefited from rising commodity prices. Rubber, palm oil, and other commodities have given many of the rural voters more money in their pockets.

The impact of rising petrol prices is not as severe as in the urban areas or the long-distances travelled of East Malaysia. Equally important, many of the issues involving religious rights for the Chinese community are less important to the dominant Chinese-educated rural Chinese voters in these southern states.

Thus, the MCA's focus and gains in improving Chinese education yield support. The main ethnic issues for rural Chinese voters concern remains the NEP, fair access for their children and inclusion, with the latter more keenly felt than in the urban areas around Klang. Indian rural voters are pleading for more development and access in the system, for fairness, especially in the areas of education and employment.

This is not to say that the bread-and-butter issues of rising prices are not a concern to many in these areas struggling to make ends meet, but rather that the resonance rings less loud than elsewhere. Land is more important than prices as well, and this remains in control of the government and gives the BN an advantage. Conditions translate into making the terrain for the opposition more difficult.

Many voters in these states feel that they do not have a real choice, and due to BN dominance suggest that they will follow historical voting patterns, rather than break from the mould. Yet, in these states, the silent majority remains engaged, open to change. They are following the news and discussions from mamak stalls to mosques are intertwined with

politics. The posters are fewer than in the flag-bombarded states of Terengganu, Penang and Kelantan, but the mood is watchful.

The last few days will make the difference, as the tide (and resources) will come in. Despite the difficulty of this terrain for the opposition, there will be dents in this southern BN core.

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