

'Rural weightage' is why BN keeps on winning
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For A Better Malaysia

There is a general expectation that there will be a swing of votes in favour of the opposition on Saturday due to a long list of issues such as the Lingam tape, the PKFZ scandal, the Auditor-General's revelations of misuse of funds, the Hindraf issue, the Bersih rally, the rising crime rate, price hikes, etc. MCPX

However, despite this expectation, almost all political observers and even the most optimistic opposition leaders and supporters concede that the BN will most probably be returned to power. Why is this the case? The answer is gerrymandering or the delineation of the boundaries of the parliamentary constituencies to give an unfair advantage to the BN coalition.

The smallest parliamentary seat for the Federal Territory, Putrajaya has only 6,608 voters while the parliamentary seat for Kapar in Selangor has 112,224 voters. What this means is that one vote in the Putrajaya parliamentary constituency is equivalent to 17 votes in the Kapar constituency. This is grossly unfair. The usual justification given for the difference in the number of voters in different constituencies in Malaysia is 'rural weightage'.

But Putrajaya can hardly be considered a rural area. Of course, the real reason for this discrepancy is obvious. The voters in Putrajaya are mainly civil servants and pro-BN which almost guarantees that this seat will be won by BN.

Such disturbingly large discrepancies are also seen in the average voters per parliamentary constituency for the different states. For Sarawak, a state where almost all of the parliamentary seats have been won by the BN in the past elections, the average voters in each parliamentary constituency is only about 29,000. However, in Selangor the average number of voters per constituency is about 71,000.

To make matter worse, three additional parliamentary constituencies have just been created in 2006 for Sarawak which now has 31 seats for the 2008 elections - the largest number of seats for any state. I believe it is not by coincidence that two of the new seats, Tanjong Manis (17,052 voters) and Igan (15,735 voters) have been returned unopposed in favour of BN for the 2008 elections. The third new seat, Sibuti has only 22,143 voters.

If the population of the states is to be taken into consideration, and using Sarawak's population as the baseline, Selangor should have 53 parliamentary seats instead of 22 and Terengganu should have 18 parliamentary seats instead of only the eight seats which it currently has.

Such a situation should never be allowed in a fair and democratic elections. The equality of voting strength must be recognised as one of the fundamental principles of fair elections. According to the UN Committee on Human Rights, 'The principle of one person, one vote must apply, and within the framework of each state's electoral system, the vote of one elector should be equal to the vote of another.'

'The drawing of electoral boundaries and the method of allocating votes should not distort the distribution of voters or discriminate against any group and should not exclude or restrict unreasonably the right of citizens to choose their representatives freely.'

In our original 1957 constitution there is a provision for differences in the number of voters in different constituencies to provide for 'rural weightage'. However, the discrepancy is limited to no more than 15% from the average constituency electorate in each state. Unfortunately, due to the stranglehold the BN has on parliament, constitutional amendments were made in 1962 and 1973 which removed this crucial 15% restriction.

In the 1973 amendments, the power of the Election Commission to apportion parliamentary electoral constituencies among the various states was also removed. Both the number of constituencies and their apportionment among states are now specified in the constitution which means that at any time the ruling coalition - with its two-thirds majority in parliament - can make amendments to the number of parliamentary constituencies in each state.

Such blatant gerrymandering must not be allowed to continue and major reforms of the electoral system must be carried out after the coming elections. However, the BN coalition cannot be expected to voluntarily undertake such reforms. For this to happen a stronger opposition must be voted into parliament.

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