

**Would the opposition have won?
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analysis A journalist friend of mine recently asked me this intriguing question – ‘Would the opposition have won the 2008 general election if the parliamentary seats were allocated proportionally?’

This question does not seem as ludicrous one may imagine, even if the Barisan Nasional did win 63% of parliamentary seats. The reason is that parliamentary seats in Malaysia do not have the same number of voters. Political scientists define this practice as malapportionment.

Indeed, the discrepancy between the largest and smallest parliamentary seat in Malaysia is huge. The largest seat, Kapar, has 112,000 voters while the smallest, Putrajaya only has 7,000 voters.

There are discrepancies between states as well. Selangor has an average of 71,000 voters in its 22 seats while Pahang has an average of 43,000 voters in its 14 seats. Sabah has an average of 31,000 voters in its 26 and Sarawak, an average of 29,000 voters in its 31 seats.

I won't go into the mechanics of how seats are allocated between the states and how lines are drawn within them. Rather I want to project the electoral outcomes of the 2008 general election if the parliamentary seats were allocated to the different states in proportion to the number of voters in each state.

A few assumptions

To do this, I had to make a few assumptions.

actual number of seats and seats distributed proportionally Firstly, I assumed that the number of parliamentary seats remains at 222 so as to make comparisons with the actual results easier. Secondly, I lump Putrajaya under Wilayah Persekutuan (Kuala Lumpur) and Labuan under Sabah.

Table 1 (left) below shows the comparison between the actual number of parliamentary seats by state and the distribution of seats if they were allocated proportionally.

The states which experience the largest fall in the number of seats are, not unexpectedly, Sabah (from 26 to 17) and Sarawak (from 31 to 19). In Selangor, the number of seats would increase dramatically, from 22 to 32 with marginal changes of between 1 and 3 seats in the other states. The number of seats in Peninsular Malaysia would increase from 165 to 187.

The next step I took was to assume that the BN would win the same percentage of seats in each of these states.

I then estimated the number of seats the BN would win in each state with the proportional distribution of seats (rounded to the nearest whole number). For example, the BN won 23%

of seats in Selangor (5 out of 22) which would give it 7 out of 32 seats in Selangor if seats were distributed proportionally.

actual number of bn seats compared to bn seats under proportional allocation Table 2 (right) below shows the number of seats that the BN would have won in each state compared to the actual number of seats which it won.

According to Table 2, the BN would have won 126 seats instead of the 140 that it actually won - a difference of 14 seats. So instead of winning 63% of parliamentary seats, the BN would have won only 57%.

Most of this comes from a smaller number of seats won in Sabah and Sarawak, both still BN strongholds.

Of course, this estimation can be criticised on a number of grounds.

One cannot have seats which are exactly equal in the number of voters because of the need for a rural 'weightage', keeping within administrative units and the size and inaccessibility of many areas in Sabah and Sarawak.

But I could respond by saying that rural weightage should no longer be an important consideration given the improvement in transportation links and increasing urbanisation, especially in Peninsular Malaysia.

In addition, the drawing of constituency lines within the states might also be more favourable for the opposition. Many of the seats with a larger number of voters are either non-Malay majority or mixed seats, areas where the opposition, notably PKR and DAP, did especially well in.

Wanted: New EC chairman

It is not hard to imagine that the areas where seats will be added will be in these areas which favored the opposition in 2008. An indication of the opposition strength in heavily populated areas is the fact that the average number of voters in seats won by the BN in Peninsular Malaysia was 47,000 compared to 64,000 for the opposition.

Still, even with the proportional distribution of seats, the BN would win a majority of parliamentary seats, piggybacking on its strength in Sabah and Sarawak. But this victory would be only leave the BN 15 seats above the 50% mark, not the current 28 seats.

This estimation exercise points to the need for the opposition to ensure that the next electoral delimitation exercise, due to start in 2011, should distribute seats as proportionally as possible.

Unlike past delimitation exercises, the BN can no longer unilaterally amend the constitution to increase the number of parliamentary seats since it no longer holds a two-thirds majority in parliament and does not control the state assemblies in five states.

One thing which the opposition can do in anticipation of this is to pressure the BN to appoint a neutral and independent Election Commission chairman, since the current chairman is due to retire soon. (The BN cannot raise the retirement of the EC chairman by amending the constitution which is what it did just prior to the 2008 general election)

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