

**Five hungry ghosts in Permatang Pauh**  
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**Bridget Welsh**

People are gathering in the heartland of the Penang mainland as the gates open for the pivotal fight for Anwar Ibrahim's political comeback.  
MCPX

However, this 'mother of all by-elections' has yet to deliver the quality of campaigning that can generate confident optimism in Malaysia's future. It is haunted by the past and political constraints of Malaysia's highly personalised elite politics.

All sorts of political ghosts have gathered in this constituency of 58,459 voters in Penang's fast developing mainland.

### **Ghost of obsession with personality**

Foremost is the ghost of the obsession with personality. The Barisan Nasional has focused its campaign on Anwar's character, and systematically used character assassination as a means to reduce the majority of the island state's favourite son.

anwar ceramah in rembau 150208 anwarFrom charges of sodomy and abuse of power while in office over 10 years ago to the absurd labeling of Anwar as an agent of at least two foreign governments, the gloves have come off in the steady stream of personal attacks.

The BN is planting seeds of doubt by using Ezam Mohd Nor and arguably Mohd Saiful Bukhari Azlan as a means to create doubt about Anwar's ability to govern. The PKR campaign has spent the majority of time defensively responding to these attacks.

There is no question that Anwar is hungry for power, as evidence by his claim to win national government by Sept 16. The negative campaigning by both sides has yet to engender the positive momentum Anwar will need to win the large majority he so desires. Studies show that this sort of attack serves to consolidate a party's core traditional supporters, and rarely sways undecided voters.

Negative campaigns also reduce voter turnout. The BN understands that this will work in their favour since their attainable goal is to reduce the majority amount and therefore gain a symbolic victory.

Despite PKR's new slogan of 'Merdekakan Rakyat' and attempt to move the campaign discourse beyond personality to issues such as freedom and national corruption, neither side as yet has substantially moved their campaigns beyond the messages of the March polls.

BN supporters are asking what they are voting for and have not been given a clear map of Malaysia's future. Pakatan Rakyat voters have been asked to vote for change, but in light of the uncertainties created around the opposition's future and different paths taken by state Pakatan governments, what that change represents is also unclear.

### **Ghost of coalition disunity**

Although personality is dominant, the ghost of party fragmentation is also wandering through Permatang Pauh.

For Pakatan, the issue of inter-party cooperation has been resolved at the elite level with a strong showing of support from the component parties. The logistics of working together operationally, however, has not been so easy. There are many chefs in the Permatang Pauh kitchen, and disorganisation, ineffective communication and mobilisation of supporters has been common.

Cooperation is building as the campaign evolves, but Pakatan is no where near the well-oiled machinery of Barisan. This is expected as it is less than six months old. PKR will rely heavily on PAS machinery for support in the key areas of Penanti and Permatang Pasir, and have to face head on some doubts that exist about the coalition working together effectively. Personal relations rather than institutionalised networks will rule the day.

arif shah omar shah bn candidate permatang pauh 180808For Umno, it faces the problems that contributed to serious losses within its own base in March - factionalism. The division contest in an essentially three-faction fight for the seat has slowed the working of the Umno machinery. While the common antipathy toward Anwar unites most of Umno, party infighting has already contributed to slowing of the machinery. Umno has not learnt any of the lessons of the March polls and continues to be in a state of denial.

The sense of isolation and defeatism felt by the component parties within the BN - namely MCA and MIC - underscores lukewarm responses within their core constituencies. Gerakan's divisions and lack of direction compound the lack of effective cooperation and reveal a fundamental sense of rudderlessness. The BN lacks the usual honed inter-dynamics that are the norm in by-elections. As yet, there is no unanimity around Arif Shah Omar Shah, the candidate.

### **Ghost of money politics**

As a crutch, the BN is turning to the third ghost running around Permatang Pauh, money politics.

permatang pauh 2008 results for state and state seats 140808This ghost is carrying around bags of money, and runs so fast that it is always talked about but rarely seen. However, some believe that it is real, and reports are being recorded. Throwing money tied with development promises is typical of by-elections, and can sway rural voters. Yet, this technique is having less impact with the diffusion of information and growing disgust with this practice.

Many even in the rural villages of Guar Jering know that a temporary fix only serves as a band-aid for scratches and does not cure the illness of exclusion of the poor. More accept the practice of development goody delivery, however.

The RM1.3 million to the Seberang Jaya hospital is just the top of the surface of funds being allocated if a victory is obtained. The endemic practice of using money to woo voters as a strategic fix however haunts the ability to offer long-term solutions to national problems.

### **Ghost of racialism**

Another ghost runs in the shadow of money politics, but he is larger and hungrier. He is the ghost of zero-sum racial politics. (Forgive me for using a "he" analogy here.)

One ethnic group's gains are seen as at the expense of another. Umno is beating the racial drum, telling Malays that PKR will sell out the community. PKR in contrast is using racial messages to appeal to the interests of particular ethnic groups in the selection use of racial appeals amidst an undefined promise of multiracialism and inclusion.

Racial realities are shaping campaigning on both camps, as the dominant composition of the Malays in Permatang Pauh is leading to the use of Malay-oriented themes. The swearing of Saiful is typical.

Ultimately, this is a contest about who can win the majority of the Malay community, and as such, is being couched as a test of national leadership. Racial discourse is inhibiting the creation of policy solutions in areas such as economic competitiveness, crime and quality of life that require effective policy. Malaysians deserve discussions that move beyond the shade of their skin.

### **Ghost of fear**

In the backrooms, there is an even more ominous ghost, the ghost of Lunas.

In the nearby state of Kedah in November 2000, Keadilan scored a multiracial victory. It ended with an electoral victory, which precipitated a crackdown on political opponents. This impact of this demon, the demon of fear, lies in the shadows in this poll, although many hope that Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will try to hold onto his record of more openness and respect for the votes in his home state.

Each of these five ghosts is hungry. Some believe they are not ghosts at all. It is not clear whether they will go back through the gates after the hungry ghost period is over or whether they will continue to live on after the by-election.

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