

By-election test for ruling coalition
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Baradan Kuppusamy | Jan 10, 09

Prime minister-designate Najib Abdul Razak, who succeeds Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in March, faces a by-election that will test whether voters, especially the majority Malays, still support the 13-party coalition government which suffered massive setbacks in general elections last year.
MCPX

This acid test for the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition comes at a time of political and economic uncertainties with the economy shrinking and the country possibly staring at a recession after several decades of high-profile growth.

Politically, the country faces a possibly rocky transition from Abdullah – rejected by voters for failing to carry out the promised reforms -- to Najib who will have to face a vote of confidence in parliament.

Waiting in the wings is opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim who has not given up his dream of becoming the prime minister by engineering defections from government benches with various promises and inducements.

najib and kuala terengganu by electionAn attempt to topple the government on Sept 16 failed dismally, but Anwar has vowed to not give up despite the worries that his antics are adding to existing national uncertainties.

Najib himself is embroiled in the murder case of a Mongolian woman for which two officers of his security detail have been charged. A close friend and political adviser, accused of abetment, was controversially acquitted.

While these controversies are unlikely to stop Najib from becoming prime minister, they create a dark cloud over his administration.

More importantly, it will be a big blow in the public arena if the government loses the Jan 17 by-election -- although a victory or defeat does not alter the power balance in parliament.

The battle is between traditional rivals, the ruling Umno – which leads the ruling coalition – and its pro-Islamic opponent that goes by the Malay acronym of PAS. The key issues are Islam and syariah laws and their relevance in Malaysia's multi-ethnic society with a secular constitution.

Numerous internal squabbles

PAS has upped the ante by announcing that its candidate, Wahid Endut, was chosen by god and that it was a sin for Muslims, who form 90 percent of the 80,000 electorate in the Kuala Terengganu constituency, fronting the South China Sea, to reject him.

Under such a contention, the ruling coalition candidate deputy home minister Wan Ahmad Farid,

46, faces an uphill task convincing the mostly conservative Muslim voters that he is an eligible candidate.

The government is banking on its development record, moderation and multi-ethnic cooperation to win over the voters. The election was unexpected and comes after the sudden death of the incumbent, a government lawmaker, in December.

Najib told national television on Jan 6 that the government cannot effort to lose this election and still manage the country well. "We need to win and the people should give us a win during this trying time," he said, adding a loss would be devastating.

A disparate multi-racial coalition led by Anwar fared handsomely last year in the general elections, but was 30 seats short of forming the government.

The Umno-led coalition lost its two-thirds majority for the first time in four decades, but has shown its ability to rule and pass new reform laws despite the reduced mandate.

The opposition on the other hand is hit by numerous internal squabbles showing that major differences continue between the secular Chinese DAP party and the fundamentalist PAS party which Anwar has been unable to overcome.

kuala terengganu wan ahmad farid mohd abdul wahid endut azharudin mamatOverall, Malays make up 60 percent of Malaysia's 27 million people, while Chinese account for 25 percent and Indians eight percent. Each ethnic group is represented by a party in the ruling coalition, an arrangement that has worked to keep down racial tensions in the past.

Political analysts said Najib is desperate for a win to enhance his image, overcome the setbacks of the scandals that dog him and show the people and the diplomatic community that he has the credentials to lead the country.

"A win will help Najib put his stamp on the ruling alliance and woo back majority ethnic Malay voters. A loss would signal a further erosion of support and raise political uncertainties and possibly rattle foreign investors," said an analyst, a political science lecturer with University Malaya, requesting anonymity.

"The by-election could not have come at a worse possible time for the government which is facing a power transition and a possible recession," he said.

The government, however, is pulling out all stops to win and has rolled back several unpopular recent decisions it had recently announced to appease voters.

The key issue, beside Islam and syariah, is whether Umno has done enough for rural Malays despite practicing the NEP – a Malays-first affirmative action policy that has alienated the Chinese and Indian minorities.

Divides could have widened

Anwar won over most urban poor Malay votes last year on a campaign platform that argued that the NEP benefits were hijacked by Umno leaders, and promised to continue the NEP but on a needs base, irrespective of race.

Most rural Malays though remain with the government, essentially disagreeing with Anwar's promise to extend NEP benefits to all races that need it.

The by-election thus visits this core issue of whether non-Malays are 'equal' to native Malays despite enjoying citizenship and state benefits in equal measure.

Since the election losses, Malay language dailies that are allied with Umno have been harping on Anwar's 'betrayal' by helping non-Malays gain greater political and economic clout.

Numerous protests have been organised by Malays, some even appealing to the Malay sultans to intervene and 'save' the Malays from being overwhelmed by non-Malays.

conversion forum protest bar council 090808These protests have raised fears among all races and indicate that racial and religious divides could have widened considerably.

Analysts are keenly watching the by-election outcome which they say would show whether Malays are buying the official propaganda that Malays are under threat and need to rally around Umno to save themselves.

Anwar, who is a star attraction at the by-election campaigns, has renewed his vow to seize power from the ruling coalition as the two sides lock horns.

"I want to say that we in the Pakatan Rakyat opposition coalition are determined to topple the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition," Anwar said at an opposition rally late Sunday that drew some 12,000 supporters.

"A win brings us one step closer to Putrajaya," Anwar said, referring to the enclave 30 km outside the capital where the federal government sits.

"It is a barometer for the future direction of politics in Malaysia," Anwar told the cheering crowd. "As I see it, the winds of change from the March 8 electoral tsunami are still blowing strong." – IPS