

Eight reasons why Pakatan lost

Bridget Welsh | Nov 5, 10 3:59pm

ANALYSIS The BN deservedly should claim and savour yesterday's victories. The combined gains in Galas and Batu Sapi show significant swings across ethnic minorities, which proved to be decisive in determining the final outcome.

This is the first major turning point in the political stalemate between the BN and Pakatan Rakyat among all of the 13 by-elections since March 2008.

From the ground, it was clear that the BN had the advantage in both seats, and I expected both wins. The results, however, are even larger than expected.

What happened?

It is important to understand that these two seats typify a particular form; they are mixed semi-rural seats, like Hulu Selangor. They represent the opposition's political periphery – places where the opposition won unexpectedly in 2008 – and, importantly, are the current battleground for national power.

The BN's double victories showcase their ability to win this type of seats and hold onto its dominant national position in government.

Allow me to elaborate some factors that shaped the results in what I have grouped under the 'semi-rural' category combined with some changes in the national political landscape.

1) Machinery and the personal touch

The BN was ready for these two battles. They had, as one party worker described, the “guns and bullets” to deliver the results. The preparation for the campaign began early and unlike the opposition which did not develop

momentum until days into the campaign period, the BN was off and running from the onset.

The opposition was stretched and imported their party workers from nearby, as they lacked effective local networks. The fact that the two by-elections occurred on the same day weakened the collective Pakatan effort and points to the weakness of Pakatan nationally.

What is particular to semi-rural seats is the presence of the personal touch. BN's strong local networks provided voters in these areas with people whom they could connect to and trust. The grassroots house-to-house approach worked well in these semi-rural areas.

In contrast, the deluge of Pakatan 'outsiders' did not translate into effective machinery on the ground, particularly since most came for only a few days and campaigning lacked the needed personal touch.

2) Political infighting

What weakened the opposition further was infighting, especially in Sabah. Granted, both sides had divisions, but Umno and BN were able to manage them better. They focused on their target - victory.

Cooperation was noticeably missing in the opposition, with people staying away from supporting the team. This was most obvious in Batu Sapi, where physical violence occurred at the start of the campaign, but this occurred as well in Galas, where PAS was internally conflicted about the need to win Galas and expend resources.

The divisions in the opposition extended beyond internal component parties to the relationship among the opposition actors, as tensions simmered over the choice of contesting in Batu Sapi and dissatisfaction over the pace of the campaign in both places.

One factor in particular that overshadowed the contests was PKR's party polls. The Batu Sapi contest showed the negative impact of non-consultative decision-making. Many in PKR are still smarting from the perceived bully

tactics of the West Malaysian party leaders. The failure to put aside personal ambitions and build bridges for the good of the party contributed to the losses in both places.

The electoral contest was a proxy arena for the internal party fight between an approach that is exclusionary and one that is more inclusive and decentralised. In order to win the political periphery, the opposition needs to be united. The unity in the BN made their victories decisive.

3) The role of local warlords

BN gains should also be credited to the local warlords - Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Musa Aman. These leaders reinforced the personal touch and provided the organisational base and local understanding for effective campaigns. They minimised infighting. What is striking here is the deficit of local leadership on Pakatan's part.

The BN has returned to its approach of working effectively through decentralised decision-making and it earned dividends.

4) Limited appeal of national leaders

The crucial role of local intermediaries stands in contrast to the minimised impact of national leaders.

While Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin was on the ground, and should be credited for his success in the campaign, the absence of Prime Minister Najib Razak due to chicken pox was striking. He won by not going to the ground and making the campaign about the BN as a whole, not his persona or personal leadership.

For Pakatan's national leaders, their presence did not yield the expected results. This was most obvious in Batu Sapi and for PKR leader Anwar Ibrahim, who was not able to move the party's vote share to striking distance of victory as the BN won three times more votes.

While these leaders did win support, the contests showed that they cannot do it alone. The two by-elections are a wake-up call to Pakatan leaders to move beyond focusing

on their own personal successes and issues and to lay out the policies and platforms to address the needs of the electorate.

Voters are rightly concerned that for Pakatan – with the slogan 'The road to Putrajaya' – the focus is on winning personal power for themselves, as it remains unclear exactly how supporting them will benefit voters.

5) Better multi-ethnic messaging

This issue connects squarely with the need to have consistent and clear messages. The 'change' rhetoric has lost its appeal, not only in Malaysia as Tuesday's US election results show. Now it is more about the delivery and the content of the change.

One area in particular involves multi-ethnic cooperation. Pakatan's approach has been to showcase individual leaders from different ethnic groups as a symbol of their ability to work together across races. Yet, Pakatan has not laid out a clear multi-ethnic platform that addresses the concerns of all groups in areas of rights and religion.

A focus on personal relationships is not enough. In Galas, questions percolated about Malay rights, for example, and PAS was not able to effectively address the concerns of voters who are less politicised and less familiar with the debates.

In Batu Sapi, the concerns of older generations of Sabahans regarding the new citizens were not adequately addressed, and in fact the focus on winning the support of the new Filipino voters backfired in a reduction of support among Chinese and Malays.

In the racialised polity of Malaysia and in mixed seats, appeals to individual groups need overarching platforms on how groups can co-exist peacefully. BN's 1Malaysia rubric – although also limited in actual substance – provided much greater security to voters. This framework provided some traction in semi-rural areas, as it did in Hulu Selangor.

Another dimension on the messaging in these two seats is the fact that many voters in semi-rural areas do not read this article. They do not use online media and are less politicised. The BN's use of the mainstream media gave it an advantage, and allowed it to reinforce its more accessible multi-ethnic framework and slogan.

Yet, this highlights the fact that connecting to the semi-rural periphery is a challenge for Pakatan.

6) Relative economic prosperity

It is particularly a challenge given that economic conditions in many of these semi-rural areas have changed. The issues of inflation and decreased commodity prices are no longer as salient.

Palm oil, rubber and logging provided relative gains for voters in these seats, as most – except the hardcore poor – believed that conditions had improved economically and credited the BN – and Najib – with these gains. Bread and butter issues are the main concern of voters in semi-rural areas.

The Chinese swing-back to the BN, estimated at 5% in Galas, can in part be contributed to better economic conditions there. A similar swing among Batu Sapi voters did not occur, as 3% more supported alternatives in Sabah, but these votes were split and the BN won the lion's share of 42% of the Chinese vote.

The opposition faces an uphill task winning national power when economic conditions favour the incumbent government.

7) Young generation swing

This dynamic played out especially among younger voters, who did not support Pakatan to the same level as before. There was understandably lower turnout among younger voters who did not come back to vote, given that this election happened on a weekday. Yet, even among those who voted, BN support increased.

This was most obvious in Galas where an estimated 7% of younger voters moved toward BN. In Batu Sapi, younger voters moved to BN by an estimated 5%. This is an important national trend, given the large number of younger voters nationally. They want jobs and better wages. BN has capitalised on this more effectively.

8) Goodies

This brings me to my last point, intentionally placed last. There is a tendency to focus on the 'goodies', and excuse losses due to the uneven playing field in the allocation of resources.

This is always a factor in by-elections and clearly took place, although many voters are still waiting for their promised items. This support only goes only so far, and cannot exclusively explain the comparatively large gains that the BN made.

Winning the political periphery

The two by-elections show that the BN is gaining ground, and Najib's policies are having an impact. They, however, are more effective in semi-rural areas – where development concerns, comparative economic prosperity, less political engagement and information, and less machinery and connections for Pakatan are present.

The victories cannot be extended to all seats, especially in the urban areas, and they are not a national phenomenon. Yet, they do suggest that the BN's hold on national power is stronger and gaining. The momentum for the opposition has stopped as they have failed to win the political periphery of semi-rural mixed seats.

The BN was noticeably breathing easier – Batu Sapi and Galas have given them good reason to smile. But Sarawak – with its mix of seats – will provide a much better national test.

Special thanks to Tan Seng Keat for his insightful reflections in discussions after the by-election results in Batu Sapi and *Malaysiakini* reporters on the ground in

both by-elections for their excellent reporting. Happy Deepavali to all.

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