



Factors that will shape tomorrow's outcome



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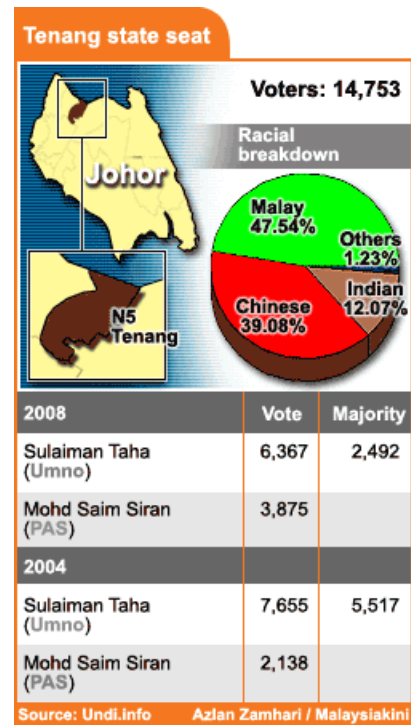
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ANALYSIS In this semi-rural constituency, rain and floods have dampened the turnout at ceramah and made for a low-key campaign. Walkabouts and quiet face-to-face campaigning, sometimes backed by 'gifts', have been the norm, as the BN aims to reach the lofty target of 5,000 majority and Pakatan Rakyat fights hard to win ground in an area that is far outside of its usual base.

No question, political watchers are fatigued observing this 14th by-election since March 2008, and hearing the same old issues of money politics and racial politics shaping the outcome.

For some, the fight for a few thousand votes in the protracted struggle for power is a distraction and waste of money. With an estimated RM150 million cost for campaigns in this tiny constituency, it is no



wonder that cynicism has set in nationally.

It is important to understand that the Tenang by-election – its campaign and political significance – symbolise an ongoing climate change in Malaysian politics that has evolved since Najib Razak came into office. As with climate change generally, we do not yet know the impact, but its immediate effects are significant.

The Tenang contest will affect future campaigns and political fortunes, even though the actual result will likely remain in the BN column. Below, I describe three broad transforming features tied to Tenang and point to a few key factors that will shape the contest in tomorrow's outcome and the size of the majority.

Heightened racial politics

Ironically, since March 2008, racial politics in Malaysia has increased. This is largely due to the fact that the BN (and Umno's) loss of two-thirds has been painted as a loss for the Malays. Instead of reforming Umno, there has been more dependence on racial rhetoric and support to win back the Malay base and undermine Pakatan.

This campaign has featured among the worst in racial discourse as the house-to-house campaigning in the Felda areas and other Malay areas has bordered on vitriol. Fear and insecurity has blended with negative racial stereotyping. It is ironic, since it has been couched with the gifts of 1Malaysia T-shirts and been conducted in a mixed constituency.



For the Chinese areas, the MCA has largely used its old mantra of Islamic state. Rather than fight the tide, the opposition has adopted a similar pattern of allocating areas ethnically, with the DAP focusing in the Chinese ground, PKR working the Indian areas and PAS predominantly in the Malay areas.

While there is some crossover, the focus in how the voters are defined has been racial, with only limited attention to generational, occupational and gender dynamics. The campaign has largely centred on racial issues (linked to religion as well), for example, Interlok, handshakes, Islamic state and more.



Little attention has substantially centred on the challenges of governance in this area – limited investment in infrastructure (roads are in poor condition), flooding, employment and incomes.

It is a fact that the political climate has returned to the age of racial politics. This gives the advantage to the BN, as it places strain on Pakatan. This racial campaigning is deepening ironically since Najib and Muhyiddin came into office, and being tied to the strategy of greater reliance on local machinery and networks.

This post-March 2008 political climate change is troubling as it is increasing intolerance and further breaking down the cross-ethnic trust and cooperation that is essential to address the underlying challenges of governance.

New political terrain for Pakatan

What distinguishes this particular by-election is the fact that it is in Johor. Twenty years have passed since a by-election was held here, and generally the level of political competition from the opposition has been muted. This is after all a BN state, its home ground, especially for Umno.

Contests for power are internal within the BN, within the MCA and Umno in particular. What is interesting is that this by-election has opened up Johor politically to the opposition by providing an opportunity to break new ground.

The two parties that have the most potential to build their base in the opposition are PAS and DAP. It is no wonder that these parties are working hard to build their machinery. PAS has adopted a progressive face with an articulate local teacher, a woman who symbolises the reforms in PAS to move toward more inclusion and broader representation.



Normala Sudirman is not the first woman PAS has fielded in Johor and will likely not be the last. The results here - along with the upcoming contest in Malacca - will shape dynamics in PAS as they debate a return to the traditional conservative Malay base (and possibly ally itself with Umno) or move toward greater moderation and inclusion. Any gains will strengthen PAS' relationship in Pakatan, as its national ambition is increasingly tied to multi-ethnic cooperation.

A similar dynamic is shaping DAP, as they picked up a number of seats in this state in March 2008. Whether they maintain or gain support is a test of its future possibilities. DAP has to come further out of its Chinese chauvinist shell to win multi-ethnic seats. Without Pakatan cooperation, winning seats in Johor is completely not viable.

Ironically, as the campaign focus is on racial communities, the need for cooperation is even stronger. Pakatan as a whole face a disadvantage as their machinery is relatively weaker in Johor and this contest is in a semi-rural area that has been relatively insulated from the influence of the alternative media.

For the opposition, this by-election will at least allows the various parties to develop their machinery and explore whether the surprising inroads into Johor have taken root or withered. It is a test whether the political climate locally has changed, and whether attitudes in Pakatan remain nationally or racially/parochially focused.

Old battles in a new battleground

The BN has a clear advantage in Tenang. Its machinery is well-oiled and many of the most prominent national leaders are from this fine state. Johor has a tradition of grooming some of the most talented BN leaders. What has however undercut Johorean leaders nationally is the high level of internal competition. This is being played out here in Tenang.

The most heated contest involves the MCA. In many ways, this by-election is perhaps the most important test for Chua Soi Lek. His credibility is on the line as he is being tested in his home state. It is not a surprise that he and son Chua Tee Yong, his political protégé, have featured prominently here in the campaigns as many see this by-election not just about the party president's future, but his son's.

Yet, the old Team A, Team B and Team C battle behind the scenes continues to simmer. Johor is a traditionally MCA safe territory, where their leaders are assured of winning their seats. All MCA seats in the state have become even more important as options for political survival elsewhere are shrinking.

If MCA, and Chua in particular, do not deliver a respectable share of the Chinese vote in his home ground, it will undermine him. He will perhaps face as many challenges from within as from Pakatan.

Beyond the number of votes will be the ability of the party to redefine and promote Chinese issues nationally.

This is a hard test, due to the difficult climate non-Malay parties face within the BN as they fight to win back public support. It is unclear that the Islamic



state issue and Chinese New Year gifts are enough to swing voters to MCA. The question is whether Chinese voters in Tenang have moved beyond these old tactics.



For Umno, the weight of responsibility lies with Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin. He is the head honcho locally, and seen as decisive in selecting the candidate. Former district officer Mohd Azahar Ibrahim has yet to come out of his shell, but he has been adequately sheltered under the Umno and BN umbrella. He is capable and articulate, like many talented Johoreans, although not well-known locally.

Yet, in keeping with the heated contests of Umno Johor, the infighting issue has not gone away. Not all of the possible contenders for the seat are happy with the candidate. The challenge will be to assure that Umno is united. This is something that Najib and Muhyiddin face nationally as infighting for position remains fierce and as the number of winnable seats has contracted with the losses in March 2008 and loss of state governments.

Infighting in Johor is not as easily resolved with promises and financial rewards as elsewhere, and while short-term accommodation may be made; the long-term divisions are real and difficult. The current political climate change nationally revolves around an Umno that is about personal position, not necessarily delivery and governance, despite Johor's valuable inputs in Umno.

The failure to win substantial gains among Malays will also have similar negative impact nationally, undermining Muhyiddin, at least until the next by-election. Setting an unrealistic target has put even more pressure on BN internally. How the BN manages itself internally is crucial for its success and Johor could not be a better ground to assess how the infighting is playing out.

Four other key factors

Beyond these factors – old racial politics, opposition making inroads with better machinery, BN infighting – there are four other factors that will shape tomorrow's outcome.

First is voters turnout. The winning majority will be determined by how many people go to the polls. But the weather is not helping. It's wet and damp, just the type of weather one wants to curl up and stay at home.

Second is the return factor of outstation voters. An estimated 20 percent of the electorate resides outside of this constituency. Who comes home, and in what numbers, will be crucial. The youth work in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, and many have come home from last night. How many, remains an open question. These outstation voters cut across all races.



The fact that campaigning has essentially been going on for a month points to a significant number of returnees. Almost all working outside are young. The youth vote is crucial, and it will likely be divided racially and by location, with Singapore shaping the outcome of Tenang more than any other by-election.

The Singapore factor potentially works in favour of the opposition as there is less Malaysian mainstream media penetration in the island republic. Many are also not happy to have to leave their country to earn a livable wage.

Third is the gender dynamic. The attacks on Normala Sudirman – including the nasty cyber-attack on her first marriage – and her husband have raised concerns. It is always hard for political parties to have a male-female contest. Attacks on women and their family are often not well-received by voters. This is an important undercurrent.

Finally, and not surprising, is money. Johor is not used to money politics to this degree. Tenang does not have the same level of hardcore poverty as other constituencies such as Galas, but this is not to say that money does not talk. It is a powerful determinant in the estate areas, where conditions remain pitiful, and in some of the Felda areas where there is inadequate land to support second and third generations of families.

Money and promises are flowing liberally. Whether the voters opt for the money in this more global and wealthier state remains to be seen. The low-key nature of opposition-BN politics in Johor may make the money more attractive as voters are assessing whether a vote for the opposition will make a difference.

The mood on the ground is quietly watchful. Many voters have already decided how to vote. The level of passion and political discourse is muted, but the sense of purposefulness among the voters is clear. They know their vote is important.



The final election results will be determined by the final push from both contending sides – whether financial and otherwise – and it is crucial that voters go out to vote, even in the rain.

Don't expect a flood - a major swing in votes - but by tomorrow evening, the results will point to new water levels and currents that are constantly evolving. One thing is certain, the political fortunes of both BN and Pakatan will be shaped by this quiet constituency.

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