

## Hulu S'gor: A critical political litmus test



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Apr 19, 10  
8:23am

**COMMENT** The Hulu Selangor campaign has begun in earnest as Malaysia heads into a record 10th by-election since March 2008.

Admittedly, many Malaysians are fed-up - they are tired of the empty promises that by-elections bring, the disappointments that come with politicians on both sides of the political divide not delivering on electoral promises, the pettiness of the campaign mud-slinging and the distraction from addressing the problems the country is facing.

This election, however, is one where people should take notice. The fact of the matter is that more than any other by-election since March 2008, this is a critical political litmus test for the country's future. It is a national contest, with national stakes.

Allow me to briefly elaborate:

### 1) Referendum on Najib Razak

Foremost, this is a referendum on the prime minister. One year on, this election provides voters an opportunity to provide an assessment of his tenure.



The record of Najib's one year in office is mixed. For Malaysian voters, the crucial electoral issue has historically been the economy. Here the BN has the advantage. Najib has benefitted from the rebound in the international economy, which have contributed to increased economic growth in the last few quarters.

Malaysia's economy is now returning to the levels it was pre-crisis in 2008. Inflation levels have stabilised, and fuel and food prices do not appear as high as they did two years ago.

This advantage is shallow, however, and will come down to perceptions. Not much of this growth has trickled down to this large constituency, around the size of the state of Malacca. In this area where population numbers have been growing as part of the sprawl of the suburban growth around Kuala Lumpur, the challenges of affordable housing, rising healthcare and education costs, sky-rocketing crime levels, stagnant wage levels and unemployment remain paramount.

Hulu Selangor is comprised of diverse economic backgrounds, but the overwhelming share of voters in this constituency is struggling to make ends meet and fulfill their dreams. On Sunday, Najib's popularity will be tested by an election poll, rather than public opinion polling.

### 2) Referendum on Selangor government

Voters will struggle to assess credit and blame, as Hulu Selangor also falls within the rubric of a Pakatan Rakyat-run state government. While its three elected state representatives are from the BN, the most-contested opposition

government (after Perak of course) is also facing a test.



A loss for Pakatan at the parliamentary level will translate as a loss of support and faith in Pakatan at the state level. Hulu Selangor is a constituency that has undergone considerable land development, yet remains largely semi-rural.

It has not seen large inflows of capital, just more people. It is not clear how this constituency fits within Pakatan's plan for Selangor.

Selangor Pakatan - like Najib - faces a struggle in demonstrating concrete benefits of their efforts in government to the voters. This is particularly acute for the state government, since it has limited machinery in the area

- traditionally a safe BN seat.

This contest will force Selangor Pakatan to reflect on what it has achieved and how it will deepen its efforts to bring better governance to Hulu Selangor voters.

### 3) Signal on rebuilding the BN

For Malaysia's as a whole, the candidate selection within the BN has highlighted another key test for the BN. Can BN work effectively as a unit?

Since March 2008, Malaysia has been predominantly a Umno government, as the MIC and MCA have been embroiled in crises and have yet to move beyond the massive defeats they faced in the last general election.

By choosing a MIC candidate, Najib has sent a signal that he genuinely wants to rebuild the non-Malay component parties. He did not bow to pressure from Umno warlords, and in particular from Muhammad Taib, to give the seat to one of its own and a Malay.

This is an indication that Najib respects the established model of seat allocations and still believes in the multi-ethnic coalition. He has opted to give the seat to arguably the weakest link in the BN party structure. It also shows the recognition that Umno cannot hold national power without its multi-ethnic parties.



Now the problem of working together looms. Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin has noted that he will follow a new electoral strategy of BN cooperation. Seeing is believing.

Relations among the component parties within the BN are frayed. Deep factions persist. Many in Umno in Selangor are deeply unhappy with the MIC choice.

The fact that a Shah Alam Umno member is an independent candidate shows that the issue of Umno fielding its own candidate runs deep. Many have a vested interest in seeing the MIC candidate lose, since it would boost the chances of this seat being given to Umno in the next general election.

The mixed ethnic composition of this constituency requires effective ethnic cooperation to win, however. The Hulu Selangor contest will test whether the support for BN at the top translates into substantial rebuilding and cohesiveness on the ground. From the perspective of strengthening BN cooperation electorally, this contest will be a real challenge.

#### 4) Test of new blood in MIC

Part of the reason for this challenge lies with the fact that in order to field a MIC candidate, Najib has chosen to directly interfere in MIC politics. Ditto, the decision to field the 'local' candidate P Kamalanathan from the neighbouring constituency of Rawang has put MIC president S Samy Vellu on notice.

Najib has not supported his choice of successor, G Palanivel. Najib has apparently rebuffed the party president's candidate choice and vision for the future of the party. He has used his prerogative to choose the candidate, rather than allow the MIC to choose the candidate on its own.

The candidate selection raises serious questions about the future leadership of the MIC and whether the party has autonomy over its own affairs. Is this the pattern for the future? Will leaders in the weak BN component parties be chosen by Umno leaders?

One major effect is that this move has given an opportunity for MIC to bring a new face into parliament. Kamalanathan has strong professional credentials, and is seen (so far) as relatively clean.

He is a young leader from the Indian Malaysian community. He does not seem to be completely under the thumb of the MIC party president. His victory has the potential to bring some new life to the MIC.

The issue of when S Samy Vellu will give up power and to whom, however, still looms. On the ground, the contest will test whether the party is able to bring in the new blood it needs or is riddled with infighting. The independent candidacy of disgruntled MIC member VS Chandran points to the latter rather than the former.



#### 5) Referendum on Pakatan as national opposition

The nomination of Kelantanese Zaid Ibrahim for Pakatan continues the tradition of using this seat for national politicians. Zaid has played a major role in institutionalising the opposition, building bridges among the component opposition parties and been a spokesperson on issues of the judiciary and the rule of law, among other issues.



He is a national Malay leader that has strong appeal across the racial communities. His selection shows that the opposition is committed to strengthening its relationships internally and reaching across the ethnic divisions.

His choice also points to the fact that there is a deficit of national leaders in the opposition with governing experience, and by slating Zaid, the opposition is strengthening its national profile. It is sending the signal that it is serious about winning national power.

Zaid faces major challenges. He has crossed the political divide, so there is intensity to those who want to defeat him especially in Umno. His possible defeat will weaken PKR especially, which has suffered a slate of defections.

He is an outsider. It remains to be seen whether he can

connect with the Hulu Selangor voters who want strong representation. Hulu Selangor voters will decide whether the opposition will strengthen or weaken nationally.

### 6) Referendum by non-Malays

This seat is a fitting place for this to happen if it does. Traditionally Hulu Selangor has been a safe seat for BN. BN even won the seat in 1999 at the height of the reformasi movement. Yet there was a change in the last round.

The change took place largely in Indian and Chinese areas. The main swing in 2008 was in Indian majority areas such as Ladang Kerling, Cangkat Asa and Sungai Coh Barat where there was a 53.8%, 42.5% and 40.7% swing respectively toward the opposition.

The opposition gains among the Indian community were significant and the critical factor that swung the seat in their favour. This contest will be a test of whether the Indian community is satisfied with the opposition, or would prefer to return their loyalty to BN, where it has traditionally been. The Indian community is rightly asking what have either side done for them.



The swing in this seat extended to the Chinese community as well. In Chinese majority areas such as Kampung Baharu Cina, Hulu Yan Lama, Hulu Yam Timur there were 38%, 31.7% and 28.8% swings.

The Chinese votes for the opposition were as important as the Indian voters, given the closeness of the race. Hulu Selangor will provide the testing ground for the new MCA leadership and be an important bellwether of non-Malay support nationally.

Underscoring this will be the 1Malaysia concept and its viability. It has already come under attack on the first day of campaigning by the opposition. Zaid will rely heavily on non-Malay support if he is to win.

### 7) Referendum by Malays

Since March 2008, Umno has used the issue of the lack of Malay unity to instill insecurity in the Malay community. Polls show that the Malay community is deeply divided over the New Economic Model and religious issues.

The divisions have been capitalised on by ultra nationalists in Umno and played out recently over the formation of Perkasa. The ultra perception that has been created is that Malays are under attack. This has been a strategy to bring back Malay support to Umno.

Fittingly, Zaid's candidacy puts these issues to the test. He has written on how important his ethnic identity and directly spoken to what it means to be Malay.

Voters in Hulu Selangor will have a simple racial test - to choose a Malay or Indian candidate. If indeed race is so important for the Malay community, then one would expect a boost to Zaid.

The fact of the matter is that Hulu Selangor Malay voters did not vote purely racially in 2008. In fact, the BN made gains in many of the Malay areas, such as in its strongholds of Felda Sungai Dusun, Felda Sungai Tengi and Sungai Selisik, to name just a few. In Bukit Rasa, the BN won an increased share of 24.3% of the vote in 2008 by fielding MIC candidate Palanivel.

Given that the BN won on average an estimated 60% of the Malay votes in Hulu Selangor, it will be interesting to see if this trend continues. The nationally heated racial context will undoubtedly bring Malay issues into the campaign, from concerns over the NEP to the form of their representation.

The BN has the most to lose here, given that they depended heavily on Malays for keeping them in the race in the first place. Umno has machinery in place in these areas, which will allow them to dampen any possible Malay race-based voting.

Ironically, by not fielding a Malay candidate, the BN has hurt its chances in this contest, given the racially oriented focus of the party of late.

Umno is likely to respond to this by engaging in personal attacks on Zaid that focus on his loyalty to the Malay community. This contest will be a test of how much the ultra-racially agenda has permeated the ground and the campaign.



### 8) Referendum by young people

Beyond the ethnic pattern of voting, the other striking feature in past voting is age. The overwhelming majority of younger voters in this constituency voted for the opposition. This trend was across ethnic communities.

There are a 1,000 additional new voters registered. For either side to win, they have to win over these crucial decisive voters, whose proximity to Kuala Lumpur will assure that they will likely go home to vote. Which campaign has the most appeal to the young will win. This will mean that both parties will have to use different campaigning techniques - Internet and canvassing - to gain support.



Every vote will count. The need for a fair fight in this important constituency is crucial. Expect high voter turnout, a tense dynamic contest and ultimately important national markers for the future of Malaysian politics.

Based on trends in polling and the traditional advantage of the BN machinery in this constituency, in contrast to the [views of others](#), I believe that BN has the advantage.

For me, this constituency has the potential to be more easily swayed by financial rewards, which give the BN an advantage and are the norm in a by-election where the money flows in.

The campaign has begun, however, and it is a highly competitive race that can go either way. If the opposition wants to win this seat they will have to fight hard for it.

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