

Lost in Hulu: Lessons for Pakatan



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Nationally people are wondering why a widely-respected candidate such as Zaid Ibrahim lost the Hulu Selangor by-election to a MIC unknown.

Yesterday, I described part of the story - [the factors shaping the BN](#). Below I lay out the issues that undermined Pakatan Rakyat, drawing again from the campaign messaging, logistics and political dynamics.

Due to the size of the constituency and national political firepower they faced, this election tested Pakatan like never before. It showcases some deep weaknesses within the opposition that have to be addressed in order for Pakatan to win national power.

Ultimately, the real test will be whether Pakatan learns the lessons of strengthening cooperation and adapting to the new political environment. The fact of the matter is that they held their own, but underperformed. Underperformance is something that the opposition cannot afford to do if it seeks to take over Putrajaya.

On the back foot

From the beginning of the Hulu Selangor campaign, Pakatan was on the defensive. They did not set the tone of the campaign, having to respond to attacks on Zaid's link to drinking and gambling, the Selangor Pakatan government and more.



Much of campaign, including the visit by PAS spiritual leader Nik Aziz Nik Mat in the last days of the campaign was tied to addressing the attacks on morality waged on PKR leaders. Rarely does a defensive posture engender a positive outcome.

This was exacerbated by a slow start to the campaign. Of the three component parties in Pakatan, PKR has the weakest machinery in Hulu Selangor. It took a few days for the party to sort out a productive working relationship on the ground internally and with the component parties in the opposition coalition.

Part of this had to do with resolving the issues of multiple sovereignty - the role of the state government and the role of the parties. The slow start was further enhanced by long-standing personality differences in style and outlook within Pakatan, and the opposition had to work to address these differences.

The election showed that the parties can work together effectively as they gained ground towards the latter part of the campaign. The DAP and PAS delivered effectively and all the parties worked well together - eventually. In a tight contest, however, every day counts.

Pakatan was slow off the mark and was unable to fully bridge the gap as it gained speed towards the finish line.

Stale and splintered messaging

Listening to the ceramah and observing the campaign paraphernalia, Pakatan seems locked in a time warp. The posters followed the same model of 2008, with the slogan “Hope for Malaysia”. The messages are two years old and resonated with the party faithful, not the swing voters.

Many voters asked what was new. The fact is that as Pakatan is in power in Selangor, the call for change or even reform has less political traction. In government, it is not adequate to use an anti-incumbent campaign. The cry of “reformasi” only served to strengthen the party faithful, not to secure new voters that Pakatan needed to assure a win.

The campaign also lacked a central theme. While some campaigners focused on contemporary issues such as the rival candidate, P Kamalanathan, others addressed concerns with Apco and even Altantuya Shaariibuu - the issue that was prominent in the Permatang Pauh by-election in August 2008.

The messages were all over the place, and, as such, it was not clear exactly what Pakatan stood for. Multi-ethnic inclusion? Reform? Anti-Umno? New leadership? The voters lacked an anchor to identify with. For some voters, particular messages did connect, such as the poster of Teoh Beng Hock, which was particularly present in the Chinese areas. For others, it was confusing and uninspiring.



This was reinforced by the fact that the opposition was hampered in getting its message out. In Hulu Selangor, the alternative media had limited impact, particularly in Ulu Bernam. The challenge of communication exacerbated the problems of messaging as Pakatan was disadvantaged in its ability to connect with the voters.

The state newspaper, Selangorkini - with only a few thousand copies - was a drop in the bucket to reach this large constituency. Pakatan nationally has the disadvantage due to its lack of access to traditional media, and in this type of constituency - semi-rural and diverse - this disadvantage is particularly acute.

More broadly, this speaks to a real need to improve how Pakatan communicates with the public.

Burden of wearing two hats

Even more challenging is the dual roles that Pakatan has - in government and opposition. It is very difficult to wear two hats politically, especially when the roles are the exact opposite of each other.

This election provided the first real opportunity for Pakatan to showcase its record at the state level and they failed this test. One main reason involves the failure to develop new messages for the new context and move beyond March 2008. Pakatan has yet to develop a new identity that is tied to its role in state governments post-March 2008. No one person can be blamed for this since it is a matter for the entire leadership of Pakatan.

Even more difficult is showcasing the successes of the state government in a constituency where the state government has made minimal impact. Hulu Selangor was a neglected constituency. This has to do with the fact that all three representatives for the state are in BN. Pakatan did not effectively engage this area before the election, especially in the Felda areas.

This was driven home as the campaign progressed and state politicians learned firsthand that many did not even know that Pakatan was in government. Some voters lived in a 'BN bubble'. This illustrated serious shortcomings on the part of the state government.

There were exceptions such as Selangor excos Elizabeth Wong's work in the Orang Asli areas or Ean Yong Hian

Wah's work in the Chinese new villages, which contributed to gains for PKR in these areas, but overall, particularly in Malay areas, the state government had limited engagement and deliverables that it could showcase effectively.

While Menteri Besar Khalid Ibrahim was highly popular and respected, the actions of the government as a whole did not come across to the key voters.

This was compounded by the fact that many problems in this constituency were associated with land. Traditionally land is a state matter, but on the ground it was difficult to resolve these issues since the jurisdiction of issues was not so clear cut.

Many problems had occurred in the previous BN state government - housing scams, land speculations, unfair land allocations, limited land rights, shoddy development - to name but a few. They remain unresolved and require the cooperation of the private sector, federal government and state government.



Sadly, the failure of these actors to work together to resolve issues for Selangor has hurt development in the state, and in the semi-rural parts of the state in particular. In the campaign, blame was cast largely on the new Pakatan state government unfairly to address these problems.

Come next election, Pakatan will have to address the concerns over land effectively in order to secure votes, and this will require working more effectively to accommodate the different actors involved. This only points to the serious work ahead that Pakatan needs to address as a state government to win votes.

Party of defectors, not leaders

Convincing voters that it can govern effectively is vital for the opposition's future. This starts with the leadership of the opposition. Nationally, Pakatan has to come to terms that the attacks on Anwar Ibrahim have had their impact.



The opposition leader does not have the same level of popularity of 2008. In part, this was the product of his loss of credibility over the Sept 16 affair that lingers in the minds of voters. In part, this has to do with questions associated with the Sodomy II trial, although the majority of the electorate see this as a political ploy.

It nevertheless has cast a shadow over the future direction of the leadership of Pakatan. Voters want to be assured that the coalition they vote for has clear leadership and direction.

The major issue in this campaign was the impact of the defections. People supposedly loyal to Anwar, such as Hulu Selangor's Dr Halili Rahmat, people who were touted by Anwar to be important PKR leaders and personal friends openly joined the other side. This raises questions about

Anwar's leadership that have to be addressed in order to win the confidence of the electorate.

PKR is becoming perceived as the party of defectors, not leaders. The defections also affected campaigning as they spilled over into weakening the local machinery resulting in the party relying heavily on outsiders to run the campaign.

Are the rats leaving a sinking ship? Or is the party finding out who is willing to commit to real reforms in

government and stick with the fight? While these may be true, the impact of the defections was especially damaging in Malay areas, and had broader resonance.

Pakatan needs own identity

More fundamentally, Pakatan needs to come up with a programme for the future in government. Malaysian voters are pragmatic and want direction on the part of their leaders. Nationally, Prime Minister Najib Razak has adopted economic reform as his own platform. He has usurped the position as the reformer, at least symbolically.

Pakatan has yet to showcase a new set of ideas to address the current challenges. It has yet to engage with how the Najib leadership in BN has evolved and is evolving. Personal attacks on Najib are not adequate to win votes. They need a clear programme and direction, based on being in government at the state level and as a potential government nationally. It is no longer enough to be different from BN. Pakatan needs its own identity that voters can connect to.

Pakatan may have lost in Hulu Selangor. The bigger challenge is to make sure that it has not lost its direction. The by-election showed that the opposition is learning - it gained ground towards the end - but faces challenges in communication, leadership and identity.

If it wants to win power nationally, it has to take bold steps to engage the electorate and current political conditions. To avoid getting lost and further losses, Pakatan has to avoid internal blame and recognised that voters want change to be more than symbolic.

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