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BN Regains Ground in Malaysia: Implications of Galas and Batu Sapi By-Elections

By Farish A. Noor

Synopsis

The ruling Barisan Nasional swept to victory in the 4 November 2010 by-elections of Galas, Kelantan and Batu Sapi, Sabah. Both by-elections were important to gauge the level of public support for the government and the new Najib administration.

Commentary

THE RULING Barisan Nasional led by UMNO swept to victory in the 4 November 2010 by-elections in Galas, Kelantan and Batu Sapi, Sabah, giving Prime Minister Najib Razak a major fillip to his plan for an early general election. The BN won the Galas state assembly seat by defeating PAS in the opposition party's home state, while in the Batu Sapi parliamentary seat, BN defeated two opposition parties in a three-cornered fight.

The Contested Seats

The parliamentary seat of Batu Sapi, won by BN's Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), which sits south of the town of Sandakan in East Malaysia, had been a rather quiet constituency before the by-election. The constituents are made up of 15,099 Muslim Bumiputras (59 per cent), 9,737 Malaysian Chinese (38 per cent) and 698 non-Muslim Bumiputras (2.69 per cent); with a total electorate of 25,585. Though the BN parties were banking on the Muslim Bumiputra vote, both the opposition People's Justice Party (PKR) and Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) were aiming to secure a swing among the Malaysian Chinese voters. SAPP's Yong Teck Lee however is known for his close links to the Hakka and Cantonese voters of Batu Sapi. The BN's candidate was Linda Tsen, wife of the late PBS leader and MP Edmund Chong Ket Wah, who died on 9 October in a motorcycle accident.

Galas, which sits in the southern corner of the northern state of Kelantan in Peninsular Malaysia, was formerly a PAS seat though PAS' victory there in 2008 was by a small majority of 620 votes. For this by-election the Election Commission (EC) counted a total of 11,553 registered voters in Galas. PAS fielded a doctor, Dr Zulkefli Mohamad, while UMNO fielded Abdul Aziz Yusof, a former civil servant who was also the UMNO Gua Musang Division Secretary. An interesting development in the election campaign was the return of Tengku Razaleigh, UMNO veteran and former leader of the UMNO breakaway *Semangat '46* party, who was put in charge of the UMNO/BN campaign there.

The Galas by-election was the simpler of the two, with both PAS and UMNO battling it out in Kelantan, PAS' long-time stronghold. Some mud-slinging did take place between the two sides when their respective candidates were announced: UMNO-linked blogs attempted to tarnish the PAS candidate by alleging that he had been caught for adultery (*khalwat*) in the past, which the candidate denied. PAS on the other hand focused its attacks on the UMNO candidate as well as Tengku Razaleigh, whose own power-base is located nearby at Gua Musang.

Batu Sapi, on the other hand, turned out to be a three-cornered fight between the BN candidate, SAPP and PKR. It is interesting to note that SAPP's Yong Teck Lee, a former chief minister, has a reputation among Sabahans as a 'strong leader' who has publicly raised questions about Sabah's status vis-à-vis the Federal government of Malaysia, and has even raised the issue of Sabahan autonomy and self-government. He is regarded as one of the more vocal Sabahan leaders who have stood up for the rights of Sabahans, albeit through a discourse of local autonomy and self-government, which is a rather controversial issue in Malaysia until today.

Results and their Implications

On 4 November it was announced that the BN parties had won both by-elections with clear margins: UMNO's Abdul Aziz Yusof had beaten PAS' Zulkefli Mohamad at Galas by a majority of 1,190 votes. (UMNO: 5,324; PAS: 4,134). The results were decisive in the sense that PAS' candidate lost in 12 out of the 13 polling districts in Galas, and the voter turn-out had been 82 per cent. Despite the PAS-controlled state government declaring 4 November as a holiday in Kelantan, the majority of Kelantanese voters at Galas had come out to vote for UMNO instead.

At Batu Sapi, PBS' Linda Tsen majority of 6,356 votes was a significant increase over the margin gained by her late husband. PKR's Ansari gained only 3,414 votes while SAPP's Yong gained 2,031, coming in third. Unlike the voter turn-out at Galas however, the voter turn-out at Batu Sapi was very low, around 52 per cent. The immediate ramifications of the results are clear:

The BN victories at Galas and Batu Sapi come at a time when the component parties of the BN are in relative disarray and in need of a morale boost. The two by-elections signal a positive upturn in the BN's fortunes; BN has now managed to win three out of the four by-elections of 2010. Crucially in both by-elections the campaigning was on the ground level using local party election machinery, without the 'celebrity' fanfare in previous by-elections. For Prime Minister Najib, the double victories at Galas and Batu Sapi will give him and his administration some breathing space as well as credibility to back up the claim that his reforms -- pushed through at the recent UMNO General Assembly -- as well as his '1Malaysia' vision have gained support among the electorate.

Fate of the Opposition

For PAS, the defeat at Galas is a major setback, though PAS leaders were quick to point out that the seat was a marginal one in the first place. PAS-watchers however now suggest the let-down at Galas could accelerate the process of leadership transition among the PAS leadership in Kelantan.

For SAPP, Yong's poor showing would suggest that his rhetoric of autonomy for Sabah has not managed to gain significant support among the people of the state. The poor turn-out on voting day, and the overwhelming majority gained by PBS' Linda Tsen suggests that Batu Sapi remains a seat where pro-establishment loyalties still prevail.

For PKR, Ansari's defeat marks a check in the party's attempts to expand its support base in East Malaysia. PKR's aim is to present itself as a pan-Malaysian, non-sectarian party that transcends ethnic and religious communitarian lines. Yet despite the fact that Batu Sapi was a Bumiputra-majority seat, the majority of the votes went to Linda Tsen, who was a non-Bumiputra, non-Muslim candidate.

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