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Malaysian By-Elections: Najib's Winning Ways

By Rashaad Ali

Synopsis

After the Sarawak state elections and the recently concluded by-elections in peninsular Malaysia, momentum appears to have swung Barisan Nasional's (BN) way. Has Prime Minister Najib Razak succeeded in regaining support, making calls for snap elections premature?

Commentary

HE RECENTLY concluded by-elections in Kuala Kangsar and Sungai Besar saw voters extend the mandate of Barisan Nasional (BN) Members of Parliament in a contest that was billed as crucial for various reasons, in the ever-changing dynamics of Malaysian politics. The election results saw BN sweep to victory with more than twice the number of votes in favour of the winning candidates compared to the opposition candidates a much improved margin from the slim victories in the General Election in 2013. Politics in the country have evolved significantly since then, with the emergence of political scandals, new parties, and old actors. Prime Minister Najib Razak has ridden the election wave to give his own popularity a boost while detracting from the many troubles of his administration.

Najib's Shows of confidence

Following the success of the Sarawak elections which saw BN win by a two-thirds majority, the by elections in Selangor and Perak saw a big swing to BN away from the fractured opposition. Just as in Kuching, Najib was at the forefront of the victory announcements of the by-elections, which signals the importance the Prime Minister attributed to these successes. Despite calls for his resignation, Najib claiming this victory as his own may go some way to stave off his enemies.

New Players, New Problems

The run-up to these by-elections has seen the end of the coalition between PAS, PKR and DAP, the formation of the PAS splinter party AMANAH, and its subsequent coalition with DAP and PKR. PAS decision to strike out on its own following the 'purge' of progressive elements within their party has caused a major reshuffling among the opposition.

This has come at the same time that former PM Tun Mahathir Mohamed reappeared on the political scene, and openly calling for his resignation, with a 'Citizen's Declaration' alongside opposition leaders and former political enemies.

The by-elections themselves saw a three-cornered fight between BN, PAS and AMANAH in both districts. This had the obvious effect of splitting the Malay vote with those who would regularly vote opposition now faced with two options, resulting in an overwhelming win for the BN candidate. PAS succeeded in retaining its core Malay support at the expense of AMANAH, which garnered a greater portion of the Chinese vote. Most Chinese voters however, swung back in favour of BN, eschewing the Islamism propagated by opposition parties.

Other factors contributed to the poor opposition showing in the elections. A disorganised and disunited opposition hardly seemed an attractive prospect, which mirrors that of the recent Sarawak state elections. Opposition strategy focused on national issues such as 1MDB and other money scandals, along with the alleged lavish lifestyle of the prime minister's wife. Just as in Sarawak, such federal matters hardly appealed to the local population who were more interested in having their own needs met. A lack of grassroots approach appealing to voter sentiment cost opposition parties dearly, especially when pitted against government machinery and their vast resources; thus uncertain voters defaulted to BN. In the aftermath of the results, opposition leaders blamed intimidation, vote-buying and the 'disease of materialism' for their defeats.

Mahathir on the other hand, has seen his own credibility take a blow. Campaigning on behalf of opposition candidates, Mahathir's support left him vulnerable to attack from his former UMNO colleagues who duly gave him no quarter. The results showed that the former prime minister's own influence is waning, with the local population more willing to give the benefit of the doubt to UMNO in its present incarnation. Mahathir's 'Citizen's Declaration', much like the opposition focus on national issues, was seen as an urban concern that lacks grassroots support.

What should be clear to opposition parties is that going it alone may not be sufficient to achieve victory. PAS undoubtedly needs the support of other parties, while PKR and AMANAH are sure to recognise the damage three-cornered fights have on their own chances. This was recognised recently by AMANAH Deputy President Salahuddin Ayub, who is keen to reconcile with PAS.

Najib: Consolidating Power

Billed as a referendum against Najib by the opposition, the election and its results were instead seized by Najib as a sign of his continuing legitimacy. Despite political scandals and internal quarrels, BN has succeeded in regaining support in rural areas and among Malay voters, which is used by the prime minister to vindicate his continuing leadership. Meanwhile, the results are also telling of the opposition and their inability to provide a credible alternative. Snap elections may not guarantee Najib or UMNO's safety but will surely work in their favour if the opposition is as disorganised as they have been during these recent episodes. A change of tack and a refocus on the people is required should the opposition aim to make further progress in the next general election. With BN's recent successes, Najib can afford to bide his time and consolidate his position. If the opposition continue to dither, Najib and BN's position may well be strengthened by the time for the next election in 2018.

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