



— 華研智庫 —
HUAYAN POLICY INSTITUTE

编号:2023-02

Political Realignment and Malay Perspectives on 2023 State Elections

2nd August 2023

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research project investigates Malay political outlooks across different political inclinations ahead of the impending state elections which will take place on the 12th August 2023. It is funded by Huayan Policy Institute and registered with UKM, and was conducted between 5-23 July 2023 in the constituencies of Seremban (Negeri Sembilan), Bangi (Selangor), Permatang Pauh (Penang) and Padang Serai (Kedah). Nine focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted among 50 Malay voters in the four localities, with a greater emphasis on the younger cohort of voters. Two-thirds of the participants are 18-30 years old, and 80% of them are from B40 background. FGD is a qualitative method of gathering data which produces findings that are indicative rather than predictive, seeking to understand the sentiment of voters on the ground and their perspectives on the current political landscape. It should be born in mind that the situation is dynamic and may change over the course of electoral campaign which has just begun.

Key Findings:

- Many participants are unclear about the functions and policies of their respective state governments. A number of them did not know who their state assembly representatives are. This is quite prevalent among the younger voters.
- Issues of concern raised in relation to state governments' performances are mostly related to lapses in the services provided by the local councils.
- Rising costs of living and good job opportunities are foremost on the minds of participants as the most pressing current issues.
- Most participants felt that the unity government does not yet provide a clear direction in its economic policy. They look for policy decisions which could have positive, perceptible impacts in their lives.
- Prime Minister's focus on combating corruption has won praises among his supporters but cynicism among his detractors, who wondered if it was an attempt at taking revenge on his opponents.
- Zahid Hamidi is extremely unpopular even among participants with UMNO background. He is seen as a liability for UMNO and for the unity government.
- Anthony Loke is well liked as a minister who performs and is seen by some as making DAP more acceptable to the Malay community.
- A number of the younger voters (18 years old – early 20s) voiced that they would listen to their parents' advice in deciding whom to vote for as they recognised the latter's wisdom and knowledge in politics.
- Working youth in precarious working conditions feel dissatisfied as they are experiencing hardship and financial difficulties in the face of rising costs of living and they perceive the current government as indifferent to their day-to-day struggles.
- Most participants think that political stability is important in attracting foreign investment and ensuring the recovery of the economy, without which the people would be the ones who suffer the consequences the most.
- The personality and performance of the candidates constitute an important consideration for fence-sitters in deciding their vote.

INTRODUCTION

Political Context

Malaysians in the states of Negeri Sembilan, Selangor, Penang, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu are going to the poll to choose their state assembly representatives on the 12th August, 2023. This is barely eight months after the latest general election (GE15) held on 19th November 2022. Disjuncture between the state and federal elections is not the only novel occurrence since the fall of Barisan Nasional (BN) in the 2018 general election. Malaysian politics have been in a state of flux ever since.

Not only had Malaysians seen the rise and fall of three prime ministers in four years, GE15 had also delivered a hung parliament with the leading multi-ethnic coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH) winning only 81 seats – a sizeable drop from its simple majority of 113 seats in 2018. The once invincible BN which had ruled the country since independence suffered further defeat in GE15, with the seat gain of its leading party UMNO dropping from 88 seats in 2013 to 54 in 2018 and to only 26 in 2022. Notable was the unexpected, remarkable rise of the Malay-based Perikatan Nasional (PN) as the second strongest coalition – a phenomenon now popularly known as the “green wave” – with the Islamic party PAS winning unprecedentedly 43 seats while Bersatu, its other component party, 31.

Before the dissolution of the six state assemblies, three states were under PH control while three others under PAS. In the face of this sea change of political realignment at the federal level, foremost on most Malaysians’ minds is whether PN would make further gain to consolidate its political position at the state level. Though state elections should rather be about the performance of the state governments and more localised issues, public concern over the implications of electoral outcomes bears heavily on their impacts on the stability of the federal government.

Rationale of the Research

This qualitative research explores how voters on the ground look at these issues. It does not attempt to predict the outcomes of the state elections as the situation is dynamic and the official electoral campaign period has only just started. Our findings are indicative rather than predictive, seeking to understand the sentiment on the ground among voters of different political leanings in four of the six states on the West Coast and to report current issues of concern as voiced by voters whose views we had solicited.

In order to do so, we had conducted 9 focus group discussions (FGD) among 50 Malay voters of the four states situated on the West Coast namely, Negeri Sembilan, Selangor, Penang and Kedah. Each FGD consisted of six participants with diverse political leanings and occupations. Five FGDs were conducted among young voters within the age bracket of 18-25 years old and the participants of four others consisted of those who were 26 years old and above. The FGDs were conducted between 5-23 July 2023 in the constituencies of Seremban, Bangi, Permatang Pauh and Padang Serai. For further details of the methodology and background of participants, please refer to Appendices A and B.

FINDINGS

a) State Governments' Performance and Issues of Concern

The participants were asked about state governments' performance. Only a few participants could explain clearly some of the programs or policies implemented by the incumbent state government in their respective states. This difficulty is especially the case for the younger cohort of the participants. Most participants raised issues of concern which were related to local council services. In Negeri Sembilan, a few participants repeatedly expressed their strong unhappiness about the prohibition of setting up roadside stalls to sell produce or food since Pakatan Harapan took over the state government. They questioned the rationale for this change as it was allowed when Mohamad Hassan was the Menteri Besar, who for them demonstrated a greater understanding and empathy towards the lots of small traders. In Selangor, there were complaints about road lighting, road surface conditions and other local council services, which at times were suddenly improved when there was official visit of VIPs. Problems with processed water supply remain a concern in Kedah though some mentioned that the state government is in the process of rectifying it. The visible increase in the presence of foreign workers working in factories was raised by a number of participants in both Penang and Kedah, who expressed concerns. Traffic jam was mentioned a few times as an issue both in Penang and Kulim area in Kedah. Among Penang participants, affordable housing was mentioned by several as an issue, and the state government was also seen as prioritising development on the Island rather than the mainland.

Among the four state Chief Ministers, Sanusi is the most well-known and controversial. He is evidently popular among PAS supporters. Though a few others also gave thumbs-up for his performance, most agreed that he needed to watch his words. Some also said that he is good at talking and criticising, but they didn't see any solutions or policies being offered by him to resolve problems. The other Chief Ministers are all described as low-key and less known due to lower media coverage when compared with their predecessors. The Selangor Chief Minister was praised by some as very effective in resolving any arising issues without publicising his actions. Negeri Sembilan participants acknowledged that their current Chief Minister was "okay", but he was often compared unfavourably against his predecessor.

b) Perceptions on the Unity Government's Performance

Economy

Rising costs of living and good job opportunities are foremost on the minds of participants as the most pressing issues. Some of them acknowledged that inflation and drop in the value of ringgit against the US dollar are worldwide phenomena which do not have immediate solutions. Participants nonetheless expected the federal government to take a lead in offering practical solutions to lessen the burden of the people. There was some agreement among participants that they were unclear about the direction of the economic policy of the federal government. Menu Rahmah and Jualan Rahmah were the only programs mentioned by the participants, and were dismissed as insufficient. Besides, participants could not recall any new measures taken by the unity government to alleviate people's financial burden. While PH supporters are willing

to give the unity government a full term before making a judgment on its ability to revive the economy, PN supporters however saw this as the foremost reason to give their favoured coalition “a chance”. Responses of fence-sitters are mixed.

One unsolicited response of UMNO supporters from all states was that they saw Najib’s administration as better than all Prime Ministers succeeding him. Nostalgic about the better and easier lives before the fall of the BN government, they perceived him as an effective administrator in delivering economic growth, capable of alleviating people’s economic burden and implementing people friendly measures such as the UTC or BRIM, whose impacts were felt quickly by the people. PN and PH supporters nonetheless did not share those views and regarded Najib as deserving to be jailed for the crimes he committed.

Corruption

We asked the participants what they think of the way current federal government tackles the problem of corruption as compared with previous federal administrations since GE14. Supporters of PH praised the current government’s efforts and were convinced of the commitment made by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

Nonetheless, many believed that no politicians are clean. Others perceived recent flurry of incidents of investigation and prosecution as Prime Minister Anwar taking revenge on his opponents. There were also those who withheld their judgment on the notion that the current government was cleaner than the previous, as they reckoned that even if there were corrupt practices committed by the current government, these might only be revealed should there be a change of the federal government. Some also questioned the fact that UMNO President Zahid Hamidi who is currently facing numerous corruption charges could be appointed as the Deputy Prime Minister while his court proceedings seemed to be put on a halt.

c) Views on Political Leaders

Anwar Ibrahim

He is a polarising figure among the participants. PH supporters saw him as a towering figure with good oratory skills. They gave him thumbs-up for not taking his salary as the prime minister, his determination in combating corruption and his attempts at setting a new direction for the country. Some commented on the contradiction of appointing a Deputy laden with corruption charges but they were willing to take a look-and-see attitude as court proceedings is still ongoing. However, they admitted that there were yet any concrete measures or policies which addressed pressing issues such as the economy, adding the caveat that it was just a few months the unity government was in place.

Those critical of him, however, saw him as merely good at making lofty statements as they were yet to see any concrete policies whose impacts could be felt in their lives. They were also sceptical of his repeated will to eradicate corruption, stating that only time would tell if his opponents, once in power, could find any cases against him or his cabinet members. They felt that he was still speaking like an opposition leader attacking his opponents rather than a Prime Minister who governed and made policies that were effective in resolving challenges facing

the economy and society. One often repeated criticism against him was that he had promised that the petrol price would drop the day after he came into power, but it did not happen.

Muhyiddin Yassin

He similarly drew contrasting views from the participants. Those who appreciated him remembered the food aids he provided during the lockdown, and the fact that he allowed for people to withdraw their savings in EPF to tide over financially difficult period of their lives. They also remembered that the interest rate was reduced, bringing relief to some. One young participant described him as Abah “penyayang”. The more common reaction towards him was that even though it was not great under him, it was not fair to judge him based on that experience as it was an extraordinary time of hardship and crisis.

On the other hand, PH supporters disliked him, blaming him for the fall of the PH government in 2020 and could not forgive him for the betrayal (*pengkhianatan yang sangat dasyat*). They also highlighted the fact that the parliament was shut down, and that many people were fined for the violation of curfews during the lockdown. They criticised his populists policy of allowing the withdrawal of EPF money, which was people’s own money and done at the expense of their retirement welfare.

Zahid Hamidi

He cut out as an extremely unpopular figure in view of his ongoing corruption charges. There was a consensus that he was a liability for UMNO and for the unity government. A few previous UMNO supporters blamed him for the loss of UMNO in the last general election. Even among participants who were UMNO ordinary members, they acknowledged him as an obstacle in rebuilding the image of the party. Though one or two recognised that he was trying to revive the party, the consensus was that his retirement would be a good thing for UMNO.

Anthony Loke

Not all the participants knew about him. However, among those participants who knew about him, he came across as a well-liked leader. Participants usually described him as a minister who was doing his work and performed, ‘turun padang’ to see for himself the situations on the ground. Some also remarked that unlike his party predecessors who always harped on controversial 3R issues, his leadership helming DAP had rendered the party more acceptable to the Malay community. The sole dissenting voice was one PAS supporter who criticised him for rejecting the Aerotropolis airport project in Kedah.

Abdul Hadi Awang

Some young PN supporters did not know who he was. Most participants who knew him acknowledged him as a learned scholar though some voiced discomfort about his recent racially slanted discourses. A couple of PH supporters criticised that he behaved and spoke more like a

politician than a religious scholar. Generally, participants thought that he was unsuitable to helm any national position of responsibility, though one PAS supporter opined that “if necessary,” it could be done.

d) Perspectives of Young Voters (18-30 years old)

Though it does not necessarily reflect the overall situation of young voters, more than a handful of participants who were between 18 to 20 plus years old were not very informed about politics or confident of their political views. When the 2018 power change happened, they admitted that they were young secondary school students and were not following the events closely. Quite a number of younger participants mentioned that they would follow the recommendations of their parents in deciding whom to vote for. During the discussions, there were some who appeared to be susceptible to be influenced by their pro-PN peers who held a stronger opinion or were slightly more informed than them.

The strategy of the Prime Minister in going to campuses to interact with university students seemed to have left a positive impression on a section of the students. They described the initiative as him “turun padang” to get to know firsthand the conditions and issues related to university students. They appeared to be convinced about his commitment to combat corruption. However, they admitted that they were yet to see any concrete policies from the unity government which were effective in addressing economic concerns or issues affecting young people. Foremost among their concerns were job opportunities after graduation, low wages and accessibility of public transport.

Among working youth participants who had started working in early 20s as lorry drivers, gig workers or in the informal sector, they were generally not satisfied with the current state of the affairs as they were bearing the brunt of the rising costs of living. Those working as food riders complaint about the drop in commissions earned by them due to price adjustment of their companies. Some of them take on multiple part-time jobs to make ends meet. Based on the social media information they had been reading, they perceived the current unity government as indifferent to their day-to-day struggles, “chaotic” (*kucar kacir*) in handling issues and governance, even rumoured to be cutting the pension for retirees.

e) Federal versus State Politics

In order to capture how the participants perceived the importance of state election vis a vis their consideration on federal politics, we asked them to indicate the extent to which they agree with three statements:

- Parliamentary elections are more important than state elections;
- Whoever becomes Menteri Besar/Ketua Menteri of my state, it’s all the same;
- Government stability is important.

The mean scores indicating their approval of the three statements are 3.5, 2.52 and 4.54 (out of 5) respectively. It means that there was a high degree of agreement among the participants (across party divide) that political stability was important. While most agreed that state election

is not as important as federal election, they nonetheless were not quite agreeable with a laissez-faire attitude when it came to the choice of the person who helmed their state government.

We asked the participants if voters would be influenced by federal level politics even if they were going to vote in state elections, most of them thought that like it or not, they would. There were participants who would like to see the current unity government to last for a full term before deciding whom to support next. They reasoned that it would be the people who would suffer most from political instability as this would impede foreign investment and economic growth. PN enthusiasts, on the other hand, appeared to see voting in state elections as a referendum to reject the current unity government, wanting it to fall.

f) Factors which could tip the balance in electoral outcomes

Considering the state of mind of fence-sitters, the campaign period may determine the outcomes of state elections in the following ways:

- Whether the respective coalitions are able to mobilise supporters at a level comparable with GE15;
- Whether the respective coalitions are able to persuade fence-sitters either of the benefit of “continuing with current mandate” of state/federal governments, or to “give chance” to a new state government; and
- Whether voters see federal level political stability as important to their socio-economic well-being in the coming 4-5 years.

Besides, the following three factors may also affect the decisions of the voters:

1. Quality of candidates

Among the fence-sitter participants, a typical answer on the foremost criteria they would consider for their electoral choice was the quality of the candidates. Some stated that even if the head of a party was good, at times the ADUN might not perform his duties satisfactorily in terms of constituency service. They said that they would look at the track records of the candidate if the latter was an incumbent. More often than not, their satisfaction with the state assembly representative (ADUN) or state government was expressed in terms of the constituency service of the ADUN or the way issues under the competencies of the local councils were handled well. In Negeri Sembilan, for instance, the popularity of “performing” or popular politicians such as Mohamad Hassan or prominent minister such as Khairy Jamaluddin appeared to be capable of swaying the support of fence-sitters or even among those leaning towards “giving the Perikatan Nasional a chance”. This emphasis on the quality of candidates was confirmed by the findings of the brief questionnaire the participants filled prior to the FGD, in which 40% of them ranked this factor as their first consideration while another 38% ranked it as their second most important consideration.

2. Performance-based Support

Participants stressed that their electoral choices would be determined by their assessment of the extent to which the state/federal government had met their needs and whether they were

responsive or efficient in delivering services. In effect, except perhaps for some PAS supporters who remained steadfast in their ideological leanings, there was no longer lasting party loyalty towards any specific parties. Among those who participated in the FGDs, there were those who had switched camps several times, such as BN supporters who voted against Najib and later regretted doing so but now feeling unsure of whom to support, or were now PN-inclined, a previous PAS supporter who switched to Amanah and now vouching for PN, and so forth.

3. Effective Social Media Communication Strategy

While many fence-sitters mentioned that their electoral decision depended on the candidate and what each coalition would offer, a young participant also said that they would not bother to go through a thick electoral manifesto. One even blurted out saying that political parties should present their message and electoral promises through TikTok. Candidates and coalitions need to be able to impress on the voters their past achievements as incumbents and explain their future agenda for change in digestible, consistent and realistic terms.

CONCLUSIONS

Supporters of PN and PH appeared to hold different views of the performance of the unity government and their electoral decisions seemed to be coloured by their political inclinations rather than state government performance. Many UMNO supporters, on the other hand, appeared to be fence-sitters. Some of them are considering to suspend their judgment and give a chance to the unity government a full term before they give their verdict. Others nonetheless appear to be already inclined towards PN in the state elections.

UMNO supporters appeared to be at a crossroads. Since political change in GE14, they have been slowly coming to terms with the idea that they may no longer be able to place their hope on the party which had taken care of their needs for decades. The older generation may still maintain their loyalty for this time around but others have already moved away, looking out for alternatives. In Kedah, some found it a challenge to switch from their familiar UMNO-styled Malay-dominated multi-ethnic political arrangement to the more inclusive, multi-ethnic outlook of PH and the unity government. Others were taking a wait-and-see attitude whereas the rest precipitated towards supporting PN. Among the younger cohort, there were those who grew up in Felda, who indicated that they would follow parents' advice whom they regarded as more knowledgeable about politics. Others shared that while their parents remained with UMNO, they were now more inclined to PN.

Beyond the massive entry of young voters and the automatic registration of all eligible voters, political changes since 2018 or even earlier have led to the widespread attitude that voters are empowered to change the government. Voters loyal to a particular party are fast declining. Calling it "political maturity" (*kematangan politik*) in a democratic system, participants expressed no hesitation to switch their support as deemed fit in the coming general elections.

Appendix A: Methodology

The primary method used in this research is Focus Group Discussion (FGD) due to their suitability in gaining insights into participants' interpretations of federal and state politics as well as their perspectives on state election. FGDs allow for in-depth discussions, enabling the exploration of complex, even contradictory attitudes and rationales. They provide an environment where participants can interact, leading to a richer and more dynamic exchange of views. This is useful in understanding why people think in certain ways and what factors influence their electoral choices, which are often complex and affected by a wide variety of socio-economic and political factors.

This research was conducted in the four states located on the West Coast, namely Negeri Sembilan, Selangor, Penang and Kedah between 5-23 July 2023. The focus group discussions (FGDs) took place in the constituencies of Seremban, Bangi, Permatang Pauh and Padang Serai. We took care in ensuring diversity in the composition of the participants in each FGD in terms of political inclinations, occupational background and gender balance, even though we were not always successful due to various pragmatic constraints. In addition, we decided to give greater attention to the younger cohort of voters given the general interests on their notable impacts on the 15th general election last November. Accordingly, we organised two FGDs in each state, with one FGD for six participants with age bracket between 18 to 25 years old, and another for six participants who were 26 years and older. One additional FGD was conducted among UKM university students who are 25 years old or younger.

The recruitment process for the FGDs employed a targeted approach of purposive sampling in ensuring diversity of background and political inclinations of participants within the specified age brackets. We leveraged on our contacts to introduce potential recruiters and participants. The recruiters comprised a diverse group, including political party leaders, youth leaders, community leaders, educators such as teachers and academics, and individuals with prior recruitment experience. In addition to these recruiters, where necessary, participants in the FGDs were also asked to introduce or circulate recruitment information to attract additional potential participants among their peers. Based on registered lists of volunteer participants, we decided on the composition of FGD participants deemed to be suitable based on various criteria as mentioned above.

Despite the advantages of FGDs, the research team faced several challenges during the recruitment process. It was especially challenging in ensuring diversity in political leanings among participants of each FGDs and to do so, we were obliged to reach out to a variety of contacts. Building connections with recruiters and the recruitment process took time, and we faced time constraints to execute all the FGDs within the designated time frame. Ensuring a minimum of six participants with gender balance for each FGD was at times unsuccessful as some failed to turn up at the last minute in a few FGDs.

Ethical considerations were respected throughout the FGD process. At the beginning of each FGD, participants were given explanations of the research and their voluntary consent was obtained before they were asked to sign a consent form. The moderator explained the purpose of the study, ensured confidentiality, and established that the FGD was a safe space for open discussion. Participants were also informed that the FGDs would be recorded for transcription and data collection purposes.

Appendix B: Socio-Demographic Background of FGD Participants

The 50 participants of the FGDs represented a diverse cross-section of Malay voters, providing a rich source of perspectives on socio-political issues in relation to the state elections. As a whole, gender parity of the sample was more or less fulfilled, with males making up 52% (26 participants) and females 48% (24 participants) of the sample. It turned out that many of the participants for the older FGD groups were between 26-30 years, which has led to two-thirds of the perspectives we had gathered concentrating in voters with age range between 18-30 years old, something the readers need to be mindful of when reading this report.

The participants' educational background varied, with 36% holding a first degree while the rest are holders of matriculation or STPM certificate or below. Occupationally, the participants were diverse. The largest group were students (32%), followed by those working in the private sector (26%). Self-employed individuals and homemakers each constituted 12% of the total. The rest consisted of a few government servants, gig workers/freelancers, business owners, retirees, and unemployed individuals.

In terms of household income (see Table 1), over half of the participants (54%) reported monthly earning below RM2,208 (the national poverty line). 26% earned between RM2,209 and RM4,850, the cut-off-point for B40. 10% earned between RM4,851 and RM10,970 (M40), and a small percentage (2%) earned above RM10,971 (T20). 8% did not state their income. Given the fact that participants stayed in different geographical localities, assessment of their socio-economic conditions should be supplemented by their responses to a second question which asked if their incomes were sufficient in meeting their family needs. The majority (72%) reported that their household income was just enough to cover basic needs. 12% reported that their income was more than enough, while another 12% reported that it was not enough. 4% did not respond to the question. This socio-economic profile of the FGD participants explains why many of them stated that their foremost concerns were related to economic issues and livelihood.

The participants' primary sources of information were diverse, with the majority using Facebook/Twitter/Instagram (64%) and TikTok (48%). Other sources included online newspapers (26%), television broadcasts (24%), Whatsapp/Telegram messages (14%), printed newspapers (8%), and radio (6%). Some participants also received information from friends/family (8%). These figures affirm the role of digital media in influencing voter perceptions and decisions and the importance of social media engagement and online communication for effective campaigning. The majority of participants (60%) had only voted once, not surprising given the age range of the participants. Almost all participants (98%) reported having voted in the GE15, and 92% indicated their intention to vote in the upcoming PRN. This indicates a high level of engagement of the participants in the democratic process.

Table 1: Socio-demography of FGDs' Participants

Items		N= 50	%
FGD groups	UKM students (voters from different states)	7	14
	Kedah voters – Above 26	7	14
	Kedah voters – Below 26	6	12
	Selangor voters – Above 26	6	12
	Selangor voters – Below 26	6	12
	Penang voters – Above 26	5	10
	Penang voters – Below 26	5	10
	Negeri Sembilan voters – Above 26	4	8
	Negeri Sembilan voters – Below 26	4	8
Age	18 – 26	31	62
	27 – 40	12	24
	41 – 60	7	14
Level of Education	First degree	18	36
	SPM	16	32
	SRP / PMR / PT3	3	6
	STPM or equivalent	13	26
Household income	Below RM2208	27	54
	RM2,209 - RM4,850	13	26
	RM4,851 - RM10,970	5	10
	Above RM10,971	1	2
	Not stated	4	8
Level of Income	Our household income is more than enough to cover basic needs	6	12
	Our household income is just enough to cover basic needs	36	72
	Our household income is not enough to cover basic needs	6	12
	Not stated	2	4
Sources of Information	Printed newspapers	4	8
	Online newspaper	13	26
	Television broadcast	12	24
	Radio	3	6
	Tiktok	24	48
	Facebook / Twitter / Instagram	32	64
	Whatsapp/Telegram messages	7	14
	Friends/family	4	8