



A Barisan Nasional campaign poster during the recently concluded Johor polls in which the party secured 40 out of 56 state seats. But a closer look at the electoral results suggests that BN's victory in the southern Malaysian state is much more precarious than at first glance, says the writer. PHOTO: REUTERS

Lessons from BN's win in Johor for Malaysia's next general election

Barisan Nasional's performance in the state polls is not as great as it appears. It gained ground because of a fragmented opposition.

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For *The Straits Times*

The Barisan Nasional (BN) won a landslide victory in the Johor state assembly election last Saturday. It secured 40 out of 56 state seats. This was more than the two-thirds supermajority that BN had targeted prior to the polls.

Analysts cite various factors for BN's success. They point to Malaysia's former prime minister Najib Razak's enthusiastic campaigning in the last two weeks that drew significant crowds. Current Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob's judicious governance also drew plaudits. Others have also noted how BN's

careful campaigning built momentum from its victory in the Melaka state election late last year.

Yet a closer look at the electoral results suggests that BN's victory in Johor is much more precarious than at first glance. This has clear implications for Malaysia's opposition manoeuvring and campaigning in the near future.

ANALYSING THE RESULTS

Let us first look at seat share.

Recall that in Malaysia's previous general election, in 2018, BN won only 19 out of 56 state seats in Johor.

This time around, it managed to take 22 seats from the Pakatan Harapan (PH) alliance and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), even as it lost one seat in Endau to the

Perikatan Nasional (PN) alliance.

Of the 22 seats that BN flipped, the party went past the 50 per cent mark in only six of them. The rest were won with less than 50 per cent of the votes.

In Malaysia's first-past-the-post electoral system, which Singapore also uses, political parties can win a seat with only a plurality of the votes in an electoral district with multiple candidates. They need not secure more than 50 per cent of the votes to win a seat.

What this means is that in a hypothetical scenario where all the non-BN parties had not split the vote share between them, but had instead campaigned in one big tent aggregating all the non-BN vote share in an electoral district, they would have denied BN an outright victory.

If one added the six seats won with a clear majority in last week's election to BN's 19 seats won previously, they make up only 25 seats – short of a majority needed to form a state government.

This statistic alone tells us that opposition fragmentation was the main cause of BN's victory in the southern Malaysian state.

We see the same story repeated if we look at vote share and not seat share.

Overall, BN's vote share across all districts in the latest election was 43.11 per cent, which is only 4.43 per cent more than its vote share for the Johor state assembly election in 2018.

In the 22 seats that BN flipped, the increase in its vote share was also actually quite small – there was only an average increase of 4.38 per cent of BN vote share per electoral district.

These small increases in BN vote share tell us that we should be wary of any outsized claims of the positive effects of the party's campaign effectiveness, its social media savvy, or declarations that the electorate has turned decisively back into BN's arms.

Assertions about how the new youth vote has swung, whether

there is a clear difference between urban and rural voters, or whether the Malay or minority voter has changed its mind, should also be treated with caution.

Lastly, note the gross distortion if we look at both seat share and vote share together.

BN's 43.11 per cent vote share gave it a 71.42 per cent seat share.

This is an artifact of opposition fragmentation, as well as the problematic drawing of Malaysia's electoral boundaries which, according to the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Index, is the worst in the world.

Also, bear in mind that the turnout in the election was very low – at 54.92 per cent. Seen from the perspective of BN's vote share, its victory is even more fragile – it won its 71.42 per cent seat share with only 23.67 per cent of the votes of all eligible registered voters in Johor.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE YOUTH VOTE?

The Johor state election was also the first time that young Malaysians were able to cast their ballots following the lowering of the voting age to 18 last December.

This meant that the total number of eligible voters in Johor ballooned by around 42.8 per cent from about 1.8 million voters to about 2.6 million voters.

Muda, a new youth-focused opposition party led by the charismatic former minister of youth and sports Syed Saddiq Abdul Rahman, participated in Malaysia's elections for the first time. Of the seven seats that it contested, it was able to win only one – in Puteri Wangsa – contested by its secretary-general Amira Aisya. It captured about 23.38 per cent of the votes in the seven seats that it contested.

At first glance, this may seem like a miserly return for the much-touted tsunami effect of new youth voters.

Yet, for a small, new political party contesting in a very limited number of seats, it is a commendable pay-off.

By contrast, the long-established PAS won just one seat out of the 15 it contested as part of the PN alliance, which is similar to the one seat return of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's Parti Keadilan Rakyat out of 20 contested.

Former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad's new political vehicle, Pejuang, was unable to win any seats at all. What's more, all of Pejuang's 42 candidates lost their electoral deposit after failing to meet the minimum threshold of 12.5 per cent vote share in their respective electoral districts.

None of Muda's seven candidates lost their electoral deposits.

Overall, while these results suggest a hopeful outlook for Muda's fortunes, the optimism should be tempered. Recent political science research suggests that Malaysian youth, as a whole, are less likely to be politically active than older Malaysians.

Far more serious efforts will be needed to increase overall levels of youth political engagement and participation.

NEW OPPOSITION STRATEGIES NEEDED

The results of the Johor state election suggest there are only two ways in which the opposition can deny the BN victory in a nation-wide general election.

First, the anti-BN opposition, which contains both the PH and PN alliances, has to boost voter turnout.

Since we know that there are clearly more non-BN voters than BN voters, more voters turning out will mean the anti-BN opposition increasing its chances of winning seats across Malaysia.

Second, and even more importantly, the anti-BN opposition has to form a single big-tent alliance to make sure that only one opposition party contests in each electoral district against BN.

In this manner, the anti-BN opposition will maximise its chances of winning in each electoral district, and its associated chances of winning the entire election.

Given the opposition's current fragmentation – including the many ideologically divided parties and leaders who do not see eye to eye with each other – forging a single anti-BN alliance is likely to be difficult.

Yet, we know from numerous examples from around the world that such alliances are not impossible, and that stranger things have happened in Malaysian politics before.

Indeed, in Malaysia's own electoral history, ideologically divided opposition alliances have been formed – in 1999, in 2013 and in 2018.

In 2018, in particular, Tun Dr Mahathir was able to team up with Mr Anwar, his erstwhile rival, to defeat BN.

Who is to say that another alliance with strange bedfellows is not possible today?

For another anti-BN alliance to be formed, two major requirements must be fulfilled.

First, opposition party leaders must recognise that going it alone in elections is a sure route to failure and will lead to the guaranteed return of BN. The Johor election result is clear evidence of that.

Second, once opposition party leaders agree to work together, they must be able to persuade their supporters and voters that they should prioritise BN's defeat, rather than being dragged down by personal animosities and grievances with each other.

In other words, now duelling opposition party supporters and voters have to "hold their noses" and re-forge working relationships to support and vote for the anti-BN alliance candidates.

Anything short of these two conditions, and BN's victory in a future general election is assured. Opposition party leaders and their supporters can blame no one but themselves if it occurs.

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