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Malaysia 13th General Election: A short note on Malaysia's continuing battle with ethnic politics



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ABSTRACT

Malaysia's *Barisan Nasional* (a coalition of mainly ethnic-based parties) secured a narrow win in the country's recent election. Reacting to the dismal result, Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak blamed his party's losses on the "Chinese Tsunami", which he described as the overwhelming support of Chinese voters for the opposition party – the *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR). This note believes that the debates on "Chinese Tsunami" highlight a larger imperative; Malaysians' constant struggle with race relations and what constitutes the character of Malaysia's political economy. Improving Malaysia's ethnic relations in the next five years remains daunting. The BN's weaker mandate and the PR's eagerness to assume leadership threatens to recycle more populist policies that can do more damage to Malaysia's ethnic relations.

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1. Introduction

Malaysia's 13th General Election held on 5 May 2013 was touted by many as the 'mother of all battles'. Many held the belief that the election would see the end of the 56 year uninterrupted rule of *Barisan Nasional's* (BN) – a coalition of 13 parties that primarily have an ethnic-basis. In BN's place would be the resolute and determined opposition coalition pact called the *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR), a coalition of three major parties; the Islamic party (*Parti Islam SeMalaysia or PAS*), the *Parti Keadilan Rakyat*(PKR) led by the charismatic leader Anwar Ibrahim and the Democratic Action Party (DAP). Public optimism for a PR's largely came from PR's impressive publicity machinery. Using multiple media platforms, the PR machinery wooed Malaysians to ride on its reform agenda. Its election campaign left Malaysians hooked on the slogan "*Ubah*" (Change) and "*Inikalillah*" (Time for change). The raising of political temperatures by the PR camp clearly made the BN nervous and this led the incumbent government put of the election till the very last days of its 5-year term.

The election outcome, however, was a letdown for the PR. The BN was given the mandate to rule for another 5 years. The BN's victory however was no walk in the park. For the first time in its 56-year rule the BN lost the popular vote, garnering 47.4% of total votes with the PR taking 50.9% of votes. The BN also now rules with a smaller number of parliamentary seats. It won only 133 seats in Malaysia's 222-seat parliament, the *Dewan Rakyat*, 5 seats less than the 138 seats it garnered in the 2008 elections. The PR on the other hand, improved their seats in parliament taking 89 seats. Besides taking 89 parliamentary seats, the PR also won sizeable number of seats in the 12 of the 13 of Malaysia's state legislatures that were contested in the election. The PR now controls 3 state legislatures (Selangor, Penang and Kelantan) and this coalition improved on its 2008 performance by gaining a two-thirds majority in each of the three states. The PR also made a huge dent in the state of Johor – long a stronghold of the BN, specifically its largest coalition partner, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). In Johor, the PR won 5 parliamentary seats and took an impressive 18 seats in the 56-seat Johor state legislature, a huge improvement from the 2008 election, where the PR won only 6 state seats and 1 parliamentary seat in Johor.

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Reacting to the poll results, Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak blamed the BN's huge losses on what he called the "Chinese Tsunami." Highlighting his frustration, he said that the strong inroads made by the opposition were due to the consolidated and overwhelming support of Chinese voters for the opposition. His statement triggered reactions from both sides of the political divide. The next day, the *Utusan Malaysia*, a vernacular Malay paper, ran a headline, "*Apalagi Cina Mahu*" (What more do the Chinese want?). The article invited strong public reaction. The article invited strong public reaction with rival media outlets rebutting Najib's statement and condemning *Utusan's* article, and arguing that the government was treating the Chinese community as convenient scapegoat for its losses.¹ The Democratic Action Party defended the PR's position with its election strategist, Dr Ong Kian Ming, reiterating that there was no "Chinese Tsunami" arguing that BN's loss came from a swing in Malay voters towards the PR in semi-urban and rural areas and the swing ranged between 3 and 5 percentage points.

Ong Kian Ming's argument however plays into a fallacy. There was indeed a swing in Malay votes on the scale that he mentioned but to refute Najib's claim of a "Chinese Tsunami" Ong needs to look not only at Malay voting patterns but, more importantly, Chinese voting patterns.² His argument would be more persuasive if he could find evidence that Chinese voters did not vote overwhelmingly for the PR in the same way that he demonstrated of Malay voting pattern.

The debate on the "Chinese Tsunami" however highlights a larger imperative. Beyond just voting behavior the debate highlights Malaysia's continuing battle at managing ethnic relations and Malaysians' continuous grappling of what constitutes the character of Malaysia's political economy. The claims and counter claims reflect the battle of ideas between those who believe that Malaysians have come of age and have moved beyond ethnic concerns and those who feel that Malaysia is still struggling with jarring inter-ethnic rivalries despite 56 years of independence. These differing views are constantly fought in the public realm as both camps understand that whoever wins the argument would have an influence on Malaysia's long term policy prescription. The next sections discuss the role ethnic conflict plays in electoral politics and the emerging political economy of Malaysia.

2. A Chinese Tsunami or mere storm in a teacup?

As a first attempt to understand ethnic voting in the 2013 election, the national and state level constituencies where a majority of the voters were of Chinese descent were identified. If the PR coalition won less than 90% of these seats, it would cast doubt on Najib's claim of a "Chinese Tsunami." If so, then there would appear to be aggregate pattern suggesting a large level of Chinese support for the PR in this election."

¹ *Utusan* is often seen as a media source that is very supportive of the BN.

² ("*Malaysia GE13: Statistics show election result was not a Chinese Tsunami.*" 8 May 2013).

Of the 505 state seats contested 98 seats had more than more than 50 percent Chinese voters. Out of the 98 Chinese-majority seats, 95 of those seats were won by the PR. Only 3 state seats went to the BN and they came from the Borneo state of Sabah. For parliamentary seats, there were 31 seats with more than 50 percent Chinese majority voters. All 31 seats were won by the opposition party, PR. This means that nearly 97 percent of state seats with majority Chinese voters went to the PR while 100 percent of parliamentary seats with majority Chinese voters went to the PR.

Compared to the 2008 election, the outcome of the 2013 poll indeed saw the coalition PR making big gains. In the 2008 election, out of 98 state seats that had more than 50 percent Chinese voters, the PR only secured 83 seats or 85 percent of state seats. And of the 31 parliamentary seats that had more than 50 percent Chinese voters in 2008, the PR won only 24 seats, giving it a success rate of 77 percent. In fact, in the last election the PR retained all seats that they won in the 2008 election.

To test the findings further, I identified marginal state legislature seats where Chinese voters made up less than 50 percent of voters yet comprised the majority of voters.³ There were 16 state seats where Chinese voters made up less than 50 percent yet formed the majority of voters. In the polls all 16 seats went to the PR coalition. Again the results were a marked improvement for the PR coalition when compared to their performance in the 2008 election. In the 2008 election, the PR secured only 9 out of the 16 seats where Chinese voters made up less than 50 percent yet formed the majority. To add, if we rank the top 20 seats with the highest majority of votes, 19 seats went to the PR and out of the 19 seats, 17 seats were in areas where Chinese voters formed the majority.

Chinese support for the PR is even apparent if we look at the support for the DAP, a party that gets its support mainly from the Chinese community. Among the PR's component parties, the DAP fared the best. It took 17% of total parliamentary seats even when it secured only 16% of popular votes. The Party won all of the seats in the 22 parliamentary constituencies where ethnic Chinese comprise more than 50% of the electorate. The last election also saw the DAP winning 38 parliamentary, improving on its performance in the 2008 election where it won only 28 seats. Reacting to the impressive results, the DAP website acknowledges that Chinese voters overwhelmingly supported the party.⁴

3. An end to ethnic politics?

The election and the ensuing debate over the "Chinese Tsunami" underlie a Malaysian society polarized along ethnic lines. In an election yielding a strong Malay/non-Malay political dichotomy, the two big winners were the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) – the largest

³ These are marginal seats where Chinese formed the majority of voters. For example, take the state seat of Johor Jaya where Chinese made up 47.06% of voters with Malay and Indian voters making up 43.3% and 7.52% of voters respectively. In another example take the seat of Penkalan Rinting where Chinese voters made up 44.72% of voters while Malay voters and Indian voters made up 43.25% and 10.71% respectively.

⁴ (*DAP Menang 38 Kerusi Parlimen*, 7 May 2013, Rokatkini.com 2013).

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