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Addressing Malaysia`s shift to the far right

The Edge, Malaysia





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COVER STORY

Addressing Malaysia's shift to the far right

Government's effectiveness crucial in bringing Malaysia back to the centre

STORIES BY **KAMARUL AZHAR**

The 15th general election (GE15) last November and the just-concluded six state elections show a polarised, diverging Malaysia, divided by race-and-religion "right wing" politics on one side, and more inclusive, multiracial politics on the other.

The results from these elections show that the Malays, who make up the majority of the nation's population, have largely abandoned Umno and Barisan Nasional (BN), and opted for Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) and its Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition partner Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia.

By choosing PAS as their major political platform, the Malays seem to have aligned themselves with the party's Islamist policies, which some say are too extreme for a multiracial and multi-religious country like Malaysia.

PAS or its candidates have not been shy about using Islam as a political tool, causing division among the people, especially where Quranic verses and narratives of the Prophet Muhammad were taken out of context just to win votes.

In an episode of former cabinet minister Khairi Jamaluddin and former Umno Youth chief Shahril Hamdan's "Keluar Sekelap" podcast, Wan Ahmad Fayhsal, the member of parliament for Machang, admitted to having used Islamic scriptures to win in GE15.

"When I was announced as the candidate to contest in Kelantan, I had my mindset ready to become a PAS candidate. I had to recall a lot of things that I had learnt in the university, among them the Quranic chapters, hadiths, and verses that PAS members were using.

"Because I needed to show to the voters in Machang that I was more 'PAS' than the PAS members themselves. That's my winning formula," he said.

However, while PAS deserves credit for its popularity among the Malays, political analysts and economists believe the Malay move towards the far right is also a result of the failure of successive governments to meet the needs of the people.

"The move to extremes is a global phenomenon. The Malay-Muslims here and the white Make-America-Great-Again supporters of former US president Donald Trump have

many things in common," says economist and political observer Dr Nungsari Radhi.

"Their marginalisation was driven by forces of globalisation externally and policy failures at home," he adds.

Government must work for the people

In the US, fiscal conservatives cut budgets, underfunding schools in towns hollowed out by globalisation and at the same time, cut taxes for the rich, says Nungsari.

In Malaysia, the bumiputera policy, which has morphed into a form of rent-seeking platform instead of a national development agenda, has not developed the bumiputeras themselves, he points out.

This has resulted in the community becoming dependent on public institutions — from schools to public service agencies — which have themselves been debilitated by the policy, Nungsari adds.

The bumiputera economic agenda started out as a national policy in 1971 with the formation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) that favours the largely Malay group. While the NEP officially ended in 1990, the bumiputera economic and social agenda continues to this day.

While there have been successes, especially in creating middle-class bumiputeras, critics say the policy has been abused by the political elite to enrich themselves. Meanwhile, the bumiputera masses are still lagging behind the other communities in the country.

"The government's failure to upgrade the livelihoods of the bumiputeras, especially the Malays, even 30 years after the official end of the NEP while a select few continued to enrich themselves, has caused the slow but steady switch of Malay votes from Umno to the other parties.

"The politics became more about identity — the whites building America and Malay supremacy over here. It's the same dynamics, in my view," says Nungsari.

The 1Malaysia Development Bhd (IMDB) scandal marked the moment of political awakening for many Malays, who realised that they could no longer place their faith in Umno to improve their livelihoods.

In 2018, the Malays started to abandon Umno, initially for Bersatu, which was then part of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition, and then

PAS, when both parties became part of the same coalition after the Sheraton Move in February 2020.

And now, PN has largely cornered the Malay votes in the country, through their simple messaging that resonates the most with the community — struggle for race and religion. The political messaging spread like wildfire among the younger voters through the coalition's smart and effective use of short-form video platform TikTok. The strategy proved to be a success, as could be seen from the GE15 results.

Meanwhile, PH employed a more moderate, middle-Malaysia narrative that is against corruption and nepotism. However, after decades of being told that their position in Malaysia is under siege, it is easy to see why the Malays gravitated towards PN.

"Some of the younger voters may have also been influenced by the Islamic image of some parties, over what it really can deliver," says Ibrahim Suffian, co-founder and programmes director of the Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research.

"It is perhaps the result of a decades-long Islamisation process that has moulded Muslim voters to focus on the forms or image of political leadership as opposed to their substantive capacity to improve standards of living, generate economic growth or deliver on better governance," he says.

Meanwhile, in response to the growing influence of PAS, some members of PH component parties, especially the Democratic Action Party (DAP), also played on the non-Muslims' fear of a more conservative way of life had PN managed to secure the state government in Penang or Selangor, where the party is dominant. This too had exacerbated the distrust between the communities in Malaysia. While the DAP at the national level advocated for a middle-ground Malaysia, during the campaigning period some of its candidates and even members of the public did not shy away from planting fear among the electorate, especially the non-Muslims, of having PN form the state government in Penang or Selangor.

And with the results of GE15 that led to the formation of a unity government between PH and BN, the trust deficit among the Malays with the latter could have widened further, resulting in them switching en masse to PAS.



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Merdeka Centre's Ibrahim: Some of the younger voters may have also been influenced by the Islamic image of some parties, over what it really can deliver

While it is the right of the Malays to vote for whomever they feel represents their interests the best, it is concerning for some that many of them voted on the lines of race and religion, more than good governance.

According to political think tank ILHAM Centre, 46% of the voters in Kedah that it surveyed preferred a coalition that prioritises the Malay-Muslim agenda, more than a coalition that promises to provide better services as a government.

This rate is higher in both Tereng-

ganu and Kelantan, where 55% and 73% of respondents respectively chose a coalition that prioritises the Malay-Muslim struggle, as opposed to only 45% and 27% that wanted a government that governed well.

At the same time, most voters surveyed by ILHAM Centre in Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Penang (85%) were looking to choose a coalition that could govern their respective states well.

The survey, conducted from July 29 to Aug 8, involved 2,304 respondents.

"Looking at the studies, 75% of Malay voters in the three PN-ruled states said they were very confident that the coalition (PN) could defend the position of Malays and Islam. In the PH-ruled states, between 53% and 62% of Malay voters felt the same way.

"On the question of priorities of the Malay voters — between good governance and focus on Malay-Muslim agenda — the answers were also clearly divided among respondents of the states," says Hisomuddin Bakar, ILHAM Centre's chief executive.

Nevertheless, Merdeka Centre's Ibrahim says while it appears that nearly two-thirds of Malay voters chose PN over BN or PH, why they did so cannot be simply generalised.

"One reason is many were disappointed with how the government handled the cost of living issue both in the past couple of years and headed into this year. From another angle, many voters were also influenced by polarising rhetoric that began in 2018 against the multiethnic PH coalition," he says.

Economic developments equally important

The government's failure to control the narrative on Islam and governance has led to institutions such as nurseries, schools and even colleges to be hijacked by extremists of all sorts, says Nungsari.

Instead of upholding the consti-



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ILHAM Centre's Hisammuddin: The government's information and communication machinery must be more effective

ing Korean dramas, there were advertisements on PN and we were 'forced' to watch their promo," says Wan Rohila, adding that the government must also intensify its messaging through mosques and online platforms.

"Knowing that the Malays are close to masjids, attend religious classes and watch live *tazhirah* (talks on religious topics) delivered by *ustaz* and *ustazah*, send as many local preachers to teach Islam and always relate that Islam is not that narrow. "Reach the mosques, the online medium, as so far, most of the celebrity preachers are inclined towards PAS. Engage with the youth and be creative," she says.

The unity government must also show commitment to combat corruption, Wan Rohila adds.

Many political analysts point out that one of the reasons for PN's success in securing 22 seats in Selangor was the voters' rejection of deputy prime minister and Umno President Datuk Seri Zahid Hamidi. Zahid is facing 47 charges, of which 12 are for criminal breach of trust, eight for corruption and 27 for money laundering. He is accused of embezzling millions of ringgit from Yayasan Akalbudi and accepting bribes for various projects during his tenure as the home minister between 2013 and 2018.

However, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has often reiterated that the unity government has not interfered in the process of the courts. He has also made it clear that the unity government will not tolerate corruption on any level.

"The government's information and communication machinery must be more effective. For me now, the information agency has not been effective in informing the people (on government policies and programmes)," says ILHAM Centre's Hisammuddin. "For example, the gov-



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ernment's efforts in reducing the prices of goods, providing higher subsidies to rice farmers, did not reach the people effectively. At the end of the day, negative elements and fake news flooded their digital devices."

Giving effective information and communication to the people will enable them to sieve through the messaging and make a better choice when it comes to exercising their democratic rights, rather than being influenced by fake news centred on race and religious struggles.

The issue with the government's communication and information machinery is also echoed by Ibrahim of Merdeka Centre. He says the unity government must also strengthen its grassroots networks to explain its policies better.

Nungsari says the government's response of introducing many policy initiatives that focus on the poor and marginalised, empowering

women in the workplace, promoting civil society and the voluntary sector as the third pillar of society, apart from the public and private, are excellent in themselves.

"There is also an explicit recognition in the Madani framework that our economic security depends on our competitiveness regionally, which opens up the perspective that has been too domestic-oriented. These, to me, are the right responses," he says.

But at the end of the day, effective communication of the government's policies, especially on countering divisive messaging, is crucially needed to address the country's slide towards the far right.

"Some of these people, their leaders, particularly, would do well to recognise that what they are advocating — turning this country inwards and putting it on some racial theocratic platform — would

isolate us further, pushing us behind even our neighbours.

"We are already a laggard in the region," says Nungsari.

Malaysia has a lot of catching up to do to become one of the region's powerhouses, while at the same time having to address its own issues such as a stubbornly wide fiscal deficit, ballooning government debt and heavy operating expenditure that takes up almost its entire revenue.

There is no time to waste in tackling these problems, especially when the country has had a tumultuous past few years with the Covid-19 pandemic and political turmoil.

Malaysian politicians, be it the government of the day or the opposition waiting to be in power, should understand that no one wants to be the captain of a sinking ship. We need to get our priorities right.



Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin's Wan Rohila says the government must let the people know what it is doing to upgrade their livelihood, in order to draw them back to the centre



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SUMMARIES

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The 15th general election, including the recently concluded six state elections, has shown that the country's political spectrum is sliding further to the far right. To reverse this trend and pull the nation back to the middle ground, analysts say the government must show that it can work together for the people's benefit.