

CONTEST OVER THE MALAY VOTES IN THE MARGINAL STATE SEATS OF PERAK: A CASE STUDY OF N.43 TUALANG SEKAH

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted by employing the observational, electoral and statistical analyses to examine the ferocious battle over the Malay votes for the 14th General Election (GE14) in the marginal state seat of N.43 Tualang Sekah, Perak. There were three main findings of this study. Firstly, Barisan Nasional/United Malays National Organization (BN/UMNO) relied heavily on the party and governmental machineries and stronger grassroots in its campaign, Pakatan Harapan/Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PH/PKR)'s campaign focused on cybercampaign, walkabouts, and programmes and rallies featuring party heavyweights while Parti Islam Se Malaysia (PAS)'s campaign was less active due to strong reliance on grassroots and limited resources. Secondly, BN/UMNO's victory in this seat was shaky because over half of the voters voted against it by voting for either PH/PKR or PAS. BN/UMNO's Malay votes plunged while its Chinese and Indian votes deteriorated. BN/UMNO held on to this seat since it won half of the Malay votes owing to its strong support among female and older Malays. On the other hand, PH/PKR failed to flip this seat since it lost most of the protest votes against BN/UMNO among Malay voters to PAS. This inevitably complicated PH's efforts to form the new state administration since it was short of a single seat to rule Perak before the defections of UMNO's assemblypersons. Thirdly, the issues of the slowing economy and soaring cost of living trounced the racial and religious sentiments since almost two-thirds of Malay voters considered the former in the

GE14 as they engaged in economic voting. This benefited BN/UMNO as most of the Malay voters in this seat trusted it to safeguard their economic well-being. However, most of the PAS voters engaged in value voting by prioritising Islamic and Malay issues. The GE14's results and political trends so far promise great risks and opportunities for all three parties in GE15 which will see the rural Malay-majority seats and the Malay votes remain intensely contested.

Keywords: 14th General Election, Malay votes, rural Malay-majority seats, United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Pakatan Harapan (PH)

INTRODUCTION

The central theme of the 14th General Election (GE14) of Malaysia in 2018 was the feverish contest over the Malay votes as they hold the keys to election victory and legitimacy of governing the Malay-Muslim dominated Malaysian polity. This theme resonates well not only in the federal elections to fill the seats of the Malaysian Parliament's lower house (Dewan Rakyat), but also the state elections to fill the seats of the 13 unicameral state legislative assemblies (Dewan Undangan Negeri) that determine the parties that run the state administrations. However, decades-old of gerrymandering, malapportionment, winner-takes-all political and electoral systems, weak and disunited opposition parties, and hegemonic and entrenched ruling parties have all but guaranteed that most seats are neither competitive nor marginal. Only periodically is the force of such institutional factors blunted by ephemeral voter sentiments and dynamic interparty competition that increase the number of competitive and marginal state seats.

Unlike other states with frequent landslide election results that give an alliance or a party most of the state seats and thus a strong governing majority, Perak is notably a swing state stuck in a stalemate ever since the 12th General Election (GE12) in 2008 brought about a sustainable two-party system that gave the winning alliance only a few extra seats than the losing alliance – a very weak governing majority. If all seats that were won by lesser than 20% of majority vote in the 13th General Election (GE13) in 2013 were viewed as marginal seats, there were 28 (47.5%) of such seats and 17 of them were the rural Malay-majority seats. Hence, winning the rural Malay-majority marginal state seats is crucial in winning close elections in Perak. Nevertheless, the typical two-party system in GE12 and GE13 was jolted by the rise of a three-party system since 2015. In Peninsular Malaysia, the scandal-laden but formidable ruling parties of Barisan Nasional (BN) headed by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) waged a two-front campaign against Pakatan Harapan (PH) that comprises the Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia

(PPBM), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah) on one hand and Gagasan Sejahtera (GS) underpinned by Parti Islam Se Malaysia (PAS) on the other hand.

The fragmentation and tumult of party system due to acrimonious elite ruptures and defections, and the widespread voter disenchantment and resentment over political and economic woes have culminated in the tectonic realignment of voters and parties that in turn swells the number of rural Malay-majority marginal state seats. At other times, a rural Malay-majority seat and a BN/UMNO stronghold like N.43 Tualang Sekah (see Figure 1) is a tall order for any opposition party to flip. UMNO's 14.3% of vote majority in GE13 was a safer majority than its vote majority in other more marginal swing seats. Furthermore, since the first contest for this seat in 1995, it has been a fiefdom of a strong local political family led by Dato' Mohammed Radzi who won it thrice before his daughter – Dato' Nolee Ashilin – “inherits” and keeps the seat. Hence, this seat has never fallen to someone beyond this family and BN/UMNO. She was the strongest UMNO candidate for this seat in GE14 as she was both the incumbent and the outgoing State Executive Councillor for Tourism, Arts, Culture, Communications, and Multimedia. Mohd Noor (2018) argued that a BN-ruled government in Perak would be strong if it were to win between 35 and 40 seats. However, Md. Shukri (as cited in *Bernama* 2018) noted that since Perak's BN faced fierce rivalry in Chinese-majority seats, UMNO needed to flip and defend Malay-majority seats (like this seat) without underestimating PAS. This was helped by a favourable constituency redelimitation implemented only a few weeks before GE14 that added a swath of rural areas to the east of N.43 Tualang Sekah (see *Tindak Malaysia* 2018), hence increased the shares of Malay and Orang Asli electorate and decreased the shares of Chinese and Indian electorate. If BN were able to hold on to this seat in GE14, BN would be likely to retain Perak.

Nevertheless, PH/PKR sensed the vulnerabilities and sought to flip the seat in GE14. Perak was expected to swing away from BN in GE14 (Rafizi as cited in Augustin 2018; Serina 2018). Moreover, PKR's Rafizi Ramli (as cited in Tan 2018) contended that all seats with 70% or less of Malay voters might fall to PH, and these would be decided by fencesitters or persuadable voters who were the “kingmaker”. The seats include N.43 Tualang Sekah which consisted of approximately 62% of Malay, 25% of Chinese, 9% of Indian and 4% of Orang Asli electorates. It was surrounded by urban and suburban areas and Chinese-majority seats, like the other two state seats within P.070 Kampar, except to the west bordering Central Perak which was a part of Perak's rural Malay heartland. Since DAP was confident of delivering all of its seats again, Rafizi (2018a) deemed N.43 Tualang Sekah as a quite critical state seat, and winning it would

provide one of the five to six state seats that PH needed to acquire in order to win Perak. To accomplish this goal, PKR nominated Perak Youth Chief and a “local boy” Mohd Azlan. He had “worked the ground for over two years” in the lead-up to GE14 (Kow 2018). This showed PKR’s strategy was, to some extent, to appeal to the younger Malays while cultivating the next generation of youth leaders. If PH were able to take on a strong opponent and win this seat, PH would be likely to capture Perak.

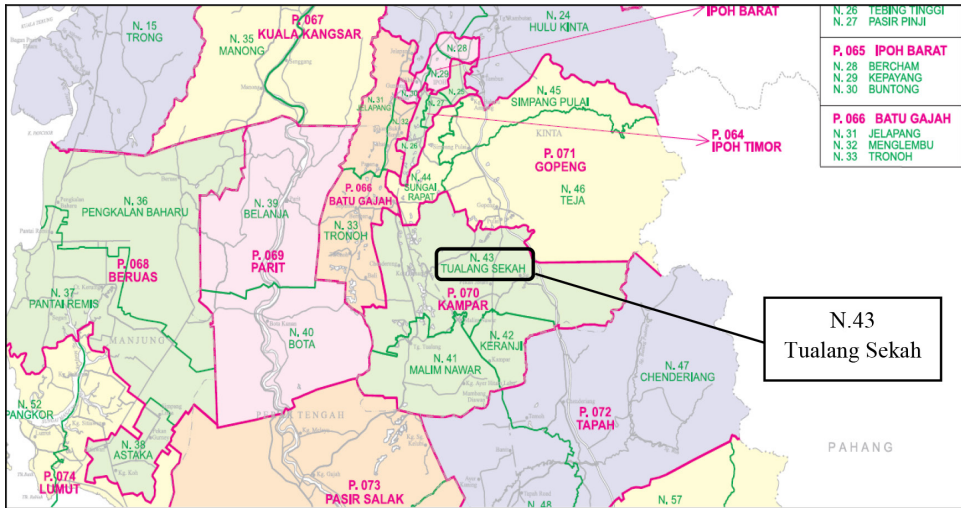


Figure 1: Map of N.43 Tualang Sekah after constituency redelineation in 2018.

Source: Adapted from Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia (2018)

On the other hand, PAS aimed to at least become a kingmaker in case of a hung assembly and at most win Perak on its own despite the odds. Thus, Azmi (as cited in *Bernama* 2018) remarked that PAS had contested in as many seats as possible when there was a chance to win and it aimed to split votes, which were why it did not contest in (most of the) Chinese-majority seats as both were unachievable. This spurred PAS to field candidates in all Malay-majority seats, including the seats that it had never contested before such as N.43 Tualang Sekah. Dr. Ahmad Samsuri (as cited in Nazura 2018), GE14 Election Director for PAS, explained that religious and professional backgrounds were the core elements of PAS candidates in case the opportunity in shouldering the mandate of governance arose. Hence, Kampar PAS Division Chief, Ustaz Mohd Sofian, was nominated as the candidate for this seat. His nomination was not only out of convention as fielding religious candidates has been the defining trait for PAS, but it was also out of the party strategy to stand apart from UMNO and PKR in securing the votes of conservative rural Malay voters by reinforcing its Islamic credentials.

If PAS were able to markedly cut into the Malay votes for UMNO and outdo PKR in gaining the Malay votes, PAS would be likely to become a kingmaker in Perak. The decisions on the choices of the candidates by all three parties showed the significance of, and fierce competition over, the Malay votes in Perak's rural marginal seats.

With the aim of examining the ferocious battle over the Malay votes in Perak in GE14 by focusing on the marginal state seat of N.43 Tualang Sekah, this study seeks to answer three research questions. First, how were the electoral campaigns by three parties in N.43 Tualang Sekah in GE14 conducted? Second, what do the election results in N.43 Tualang Sekah from GE12 to GE14 tell us about the local electoral dynamics and trends? Last but not least, what are the electoral dynamics and trends among the Malay voters in N.43 Tualang Sekah in GE14 specifically with respect to turnout rates, partisan support by ethnicity, gender, and age, and consideration of issues by partisan support? These warrant in different types of data as in fieldwork and social media observations, election results, and survey data, respectively. Hence, this study relies on quantitative data to a large extent and qualitative data to a small extent.

A SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE OF N.43 TUALANG SEKAH

Based on the fieldwork observation, this section delves into the socioeconomic profile of N.43 Tualang Sekah with a focus on the Malay population. This seat is one of the three state seats within the parliamentary seat of P.070 Kampar. Despite its close proximity to the urbanised areas of Kampar, Gopeng and Batu Gajah (see Figure 1) and better road access and road conditions vis-à-vis other more remote rural seats, this seat is undeniably a rural seat for two good reasons. First of all, Malay villages dot the landscape, where a turn from any main road tends to lead to "hidden" Malay villages with traditional or contemporary architectural styles. While some villages have tarred roads with lighting, others have roads that are rocky, sandy, uneven, narrow, and even with potholes and roadside plants overgrown. Some are so long, winding, and full of cul-de-sacs that non-local drivers may easily get lost. Moreover, some Malay villages are hollowed out when there are many vacant and abandoned houses, leaving a surreal and eerily-looking impression. This points to the fact that some villagers have chosen to leave behind their homes to seek a better life elsewhere. Nevertheless, some houses like those in Kampung Changkat Belangkor are actually much bigger, prettier, with gardens, and well equipped with air-conditioners. Besides, Malay banquets or *jamuan* are still common here.

Second, most of the economic activities and job opportunities are found in the plantation, agriculture, aquaculture, natural resource extraction, and catering sectors. The most common commercial plants include oil palms and rubber, coconut, and durian trees. Moreover, many villagers cultivate plants and fruits for their daily consumption and to a small extent for sales. Some Malay villagers also gather produce like wild stink beans and bamboo shoots and fish in the rivers, ponds and mining lakes there. Other rising economic sectors are the team building and sports activities, especially in the area of Sahom and near Kuala Dipang, the homestays, especially between Kampung Kuala Dipang and Kampung Gunong Mesar Hilir, and the underdeveloped agritourism with great potentials.

ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS: THREE PARTIES, THREE STRATEGIES

The electoral campaigns can be viewed in three aspects, viz. the war of party flags and campaign banners (the flag war), the grassroots campaigns that feature the retail politics of face-to-face encounters with voters through campaign events and walkabouts, and the online social media warfare (the cyber campaigns).

First of all, the Malaysian electoral season is colourful due to the party flags and campaign banners sprouting up at key locations and intersections. Flags bearing BN's logo were the most commonly found in N.43 Tualang Sekah. As in GE13, Dato' Sri Najib Razak was the face of BN's campaigns in GE14 that depicted him as "a smiling, benevolent, and almost saintly leader" (Funston 2018, 71). In some ways, BN's flag war was reminiscent of presidential elections elsewhere even though Malaysia practises parliamentary democracy. BN's manifesto, too, had a Trumpesque flair with the slogan "Hebatkan Negara Aku" or "Making My Country Great" (Funston 2018, 71). Some banners also contained messages like "Barisan Nasional, Hidup Rakyat" and various allegations targeting DAP's previous promises and its administration in Penang. In contrast to the banners displaying the face of Dato' Sri Najib which were put up ubiquitously very early on, the banners displaying the face of Dato' Nolee Ashilin in a bright red headscarf – the iconic colour for Wanita UMNO – only began to don the main streets within the area three days after the nomination day (1 May 2018). Furthermore, some BN supporters also displayed various stickers with slogans such as "BN My Choice, Vote for BN" on their cars and houses.

Opposition parties, divided or united, always campaigned with their own logos in the past. GE14 was extraordinary as PH unprecedentedly campaigned under a single logo of PKR's logo as a response to the order of the Registrar of Societies (RoS) which regulates and registers political parties in Malaysia to temporarily

disband PPBM and forbid the use of its own logo a few weeks before GE14. PKR's flags were the second most commonly found flags in N.43 Tualang Sekah. Since Tun Dr. Mahathir was outlawed as the face of PH's flag war (Funston 2018, 71), PKR put up banners only displaying the local candidates. PAS put up the least number of flags and placed it in several key locations of the area. PAS also displayed their banners with the slogan "Vote for PAS, A Harmonious Malaysia" which were put up two days after the nomination day. PAS supporters also made a sailboat out of the party flags and placed it in the middle of Kampung Tualang Sekah.

In Malaysia, voter engagement via constituency service and canvassing during the get-out-the-vote campaigns that entail candidates' direct and personal interactions with the masses, especially the grassroots, matters a great deal. UMNO has always been "a finely tuned machine" with extensive reach over the rural communities (Pepinsky 2015, 202). BN's own machinery also ran efficiently as seen in their effort for putting up posters, organising rallies and fielding canvassing agents (Funston 2018, 72). BN was known to prioritise the official functions to meet with voters and reinforce their support. For instance, a state government's official programme called "Sayang Malaysia #Kuala Dipang" was held on 1 May 2018 in Kuala Dipang, Kampar, where the programme's banners bearing the logo of "Visit Perak Malaysia" by Tourism Perak Management Berhad were put up together with BN's flags.

In GE14, BN resorted to its usual practice of campaigning by exploiting money, machinery and media – the infamous "Three Ms" – that PH could not match but counteracted through mass mobilisation of supporters, organisation of popular rallies and efficient use of digital media (Funston 2018, 71–73). In key seats around the nation, PH strategically included the heavyweights of the party in its rallies and programmes. Mohd Azlan got both Dato' Seri Dr. Wan Azizah and Rafizi, the then PKR's President and Vice-President respectively, to headline a high-tea programme and a few rounds of *ceramah* (campaign talks) separately in and near this seat. Due to its perceived critical role in determining the next Perak state administration, Rafizi had invested a lot of time and efforts in campaigning with Mohd Azlan to the extent that he visited the seat for at least three times from February to April (Rafizi 2018b) and at least once more a few days before GE14 (Rafizi 2018c). Mohd Azlan was also seen to frequently engage in walkabouts by either going solo or with other candidates like the DAP candidate for P.070 Kampar, Thomas Su.

Lastly, PAS' campaigns were generally less active and much low-keyed vis-à-vis other campaigns. The only exception observed during fieldwork was a small

rally in the night market beside the Kuala Dipang Hall. The speakers raised three arguments to galvanise support: firstly, the credibility of PAS as a clean, corruption-free alternative, as shown in its administration in Kelantan; secondly, the readiness of PAS in taking over the government, both at the federal and state levels, as they were contesting in over 150 federal seats and 40 state seats; and lastly, in contrast to BN which contains Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and PH which contains DAP who are both “insult Islam”, PAS did not forge any alliance with such parties as PAS’ struggle was allegedly beyond race and religion.

In Malaysia, most of the mainstream media were either owned by, affiliated with, co-opted by, or aligned with BN. Thus, news and information were heavily skewed to favour BN. Such a media hegemony of BN had haunted the oppositions for decades, until the advent of internet opened the windows for the opposition to challenge BN in the cyberspace, especially since the reformation era (*Reformasi*) in late 1990s. The oppositions’ effective use of cyberspace in GE12 and GE13 was evident. Thus, candidates from all parties were keenly aware of the necessity and significance of social media in GE14 so as to enhance face-to-face campaigns and to overcome geographical barriers, financial constraints, or logistical difficulty, either through WhatsApp, Facebook Live, Facebook and YouTube videos, or Twitter along with the inception of cross-platform messaging and heavy use of visuals and infographics (Ng and Faris 2018).

While cyberspace has steadily become the main source of information for those who seek alternative, critical, and independent political views and news, particularly those who support or sympathise with the opposition, BN was eager to thwart the opposition’s cyber campaigns and to consolidate its base that has also begun to embrace the digital age. Thus, both BN and PH mobilised their members and supporters, and in the case of BN even the government officers, to get out their messages to win the social media warfare (Sumisha 2018). Nevertheless, the candidates might emphasise cyber campaigns at varying degrees. While some were relatively more active on social media, others were barely seen online.

Apart from pictures of giving away aid, door-to-door visits and community programmes, local BN’s official Facebook page was neither active nor updated most likely because BN’s reliance on party and governmental machineries in campaigning made it merely a supplementary campaign method in GE14. In contrast, Mohd Azlan was very active on his Facebook page which featured footages of his involvements in community issues in Malay and Orang Asli villages. He also livestreamed his rallies, particularly the speeches headlined by the party heavyweights or other PH candidates. However, the impacts of such

cyber campaigns might be limited in N.43 Tualang Sekah because of the cultural digital divide in which rural Malay voters still prefer mainstream media and the online news and social media information which align more closely with their more conservative, racialised and religious orientation. PAS was relatively silent online. A Facebook page which was probably set up by PAS members in Kampar was inactive.

All in all, the PKR candidate relied more on cyber campaigns than the other two candidates, most probably as their stronger grassroots afforded them the confidence to focus more on traditional canvassing methods. However, UMNO's incumbency advantage, abundant resources, and broader and deeper grassroots allowed it to outflank both PAS and PKR in electoral campaigns.

ELECTORAL ANALYSIS ON N.43 TUALANG SEKAH

Figure 2 shows the election results in N.43 Tualang Sekah from GE12 to GE14. Dato' Nolee Ashilin eked out a victory in GE14 by 1,099 votes, or 5.6% of majority votes, a sharp drop from 14.3% in GE13 and 14.1% in GE12. Although she scored a hat-trick across three elections, her margins of victory deteriorated and unprecedentedly tumbled to a plurality of votes. This was a pyrrhic victory not only because over half of voters had voted against her, but also it showed that without the strong support from the non-Malays and the religiously conservative and disenchanted Malays, UMNO's hold on the seat was far from strong. A victory without a majority of votes in this seat was replicated across almost all of BN's winning state seats in Perak.

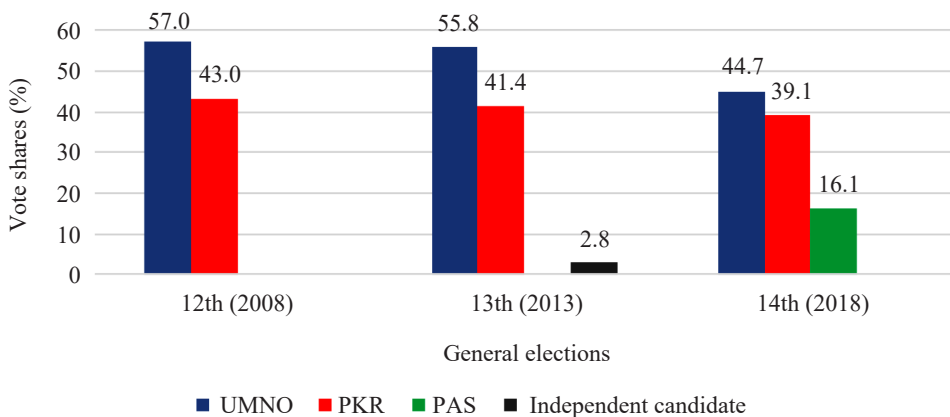


Figure 2: Election results in N.43 Tualang Sekah from GE12 to GE14.

This runs counter to the conventional wisdom that a multi-cornered contest favours the incumbent while a straight fight presents a fairer chance for the challenger. In fact, Gomez (as cited in Chan 2018) argued that a three-way split of Malay votes in the marginal seats of Malay heartland doomed BN despite gerrymandering. In N.43 Tualang Sekah, BN won a strong majority of votes when it faced off with a single viable challenger from PKR in GE12 and GE13, but won merely a plurality of votes when it faced two challengers in GE14. Hence, it seems like that wisdom is only a cliché that is presumptive but not prescriptive. A multi-cornered contest is a double-edge sword that can cut one way or another at different times in different places, depending on the dynamic party system and voter sentiments.

By looking back at each party's expectation in the lead-up to GE14 as stated in the Introduction, more could be inferred from Figure 2 and Perak's state election results that showed PH won with 29 seats, BN with 27 and PAS with three. Firstly, although UMNO held on to this seat, BN failed to retain Perak as its Malay votes plunged while it continued to haemorrhage Chinese and Indian votes. In a pluralistic state like Perak, BN could ill afford to alienate both ethnic majority and ethnic minority voters when it faced two strong competitors that appeal to each of those ethnic groups. BN needed the overwhelming support from at least one of them to win Perak, and it was doomed when that did not happen. Secondly, PKR's failure to capture this seat complicated PH's efforts to form Perak's new state administration although it finally occurred after two UMNO assemblypersons formally supported Dato' Seri Ahmad Faizal, the sole assemblyperson of PPBM, as the new Chief Minister. Despite many protest votes against BN from Malay voters in N.43 Tualang Sekah, Weiss (2018a) noted that opposition disunity in GE14 effectively split the protest votes. PH needed to win a lion's share of those protest votes so as to win this seat, and it was doomed when that did not happen. Lastly, since PAS was successful in both markedly cutting into UMNO's Malay votes and outdoing PKR in gaining Malay votes in this seat, PAS emerged as the "kingmaker" in Perak although this leverage was muted after the defections of UMNO's assemblypersons. PAS' gains were mostly at the expense of UMNO, rather than PKR as its vote shares and its Chinese and Indian votes remained stable across three elections. PAS needed to win most of the protest votes against BN/UMNO, and it was "triumphant" when that occurred despite losing in this seat.

MALAY VOTES IN N.43 TUALANG SEKAH: WHAT HAPPENED IN GE14?

To supplement the electoral analysis above, a survey was conducted from May 2018 to October 2018 by using purposive sampling to a very large extent and snowball sampling to a small extent. The sampling methods were chosen in order to recruit only the Malay registered voters in N.43 Tualang Sekah. Moreover, it was anticipated that recruiting those respondents would be difficult due to the cultural factors of rural Malays who shun survey either since they are very discreet, i.e., they generally do not like revealing or talking about their political views, or that they do not understand or are unfamiliar with surveys, thus causing their mistrust and wariness towards the researchers' intent. With the help of three local surveyors, two of whom were Malays, 383 respondents were recruited. The margin of error was 4.95% with a 95% level of confidence. The survey data were then coded and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 24.0 by focusing on the turnout rates, partisan support by ethnicity, gender, and age, and consideration of issues by partisan support.

Firstly, over 86% of respondents turned out to vote in GE14. Since the official turnout rate of nearly 81% for this seat included non-Malay voters, comparison between the two was neither desirable nor accurate. However, it could be said that the turnout rate for the Malay electorate in N.43 Tualang Sekah was comparatively high. The top three reasons of abstention were sickness, apathy or antipathy, and the perception that there was no difference in turning out to vote or not. Notably, although half of all respondents were between 21 and 40 years old, none cast a spoilt vote intentionally. This was despite 2.2% of spoilt votes being cast in this seat amid a growing ruckus of cynical young voters who vowed to do so before GE14.

Secondly, most of the respondents voted for UMNO (47.9%) in GE14, followed by PKR (13.3%) and PAS (6.7%), as shown in Figure 3. This result is difficult to interpret as there is no official statistics from Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya that state the partisan support by ethnicity. Hence, any comparison between the GE14's results and the survey finding is improbable. However, partisan support by ethnicity in GE14 could be estimated with four assumptions. First, different ethnic groups turned out at such rates that their composition among voters was exactly the same as their composition among electorate. Second, PKR won 85%–95% of Chinese votes and 65%–75% of Indian votes, with a gap of 10% below the maximum vote shares as estimated by Merdeka Center (as cited in *Free Malaysia Today* 2018). Third, all PAS voters were Malays. Fourth, PKR and UMNO split the votes of other ethnic groups, of which Orang Asli constituted over 93% in

this seat and over 71% in Perak, at a ratio of 1:9. This lopsided ratio was because Orang Asli voters “voted overwhelmingly for BN” in GE14 (Edwards 2018). The resulting estimates, as shown in Figure 4, show that UMNO, PKR, and PAS won 55.2%–60.6%, 13.5%–19.0% and 25.9% of Malay votes, respectively. PKR’s estimate was notably below Rafizi’s (as cited in *The Straits Times* 2018) estimate that PH’s share of Malay votes was 20%–30% in Perak. This was likely due to its weaker performances in some rural Malay-majority seats. In contrast, UMNO presumably won a majority of Malay votes, and this was the key to its victory in this seat. Notwithstanding the above, we must be mindful that any analysis on partisan support by ethnicity is at best estimate or a speculation.

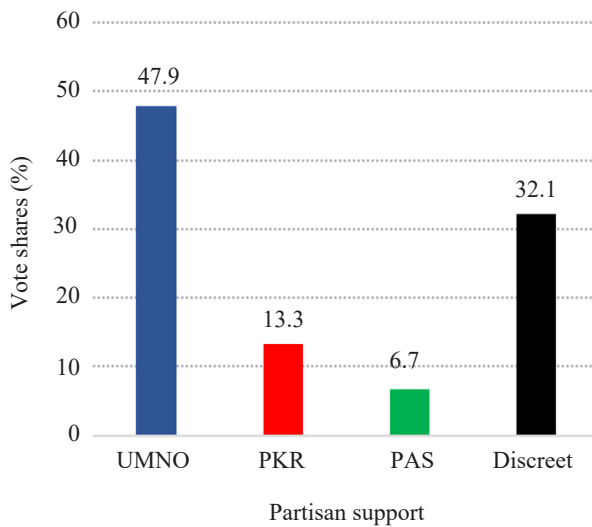


Figure 3: Respondents’ partisan support in GE14.

The result above is also difficult to interpret as Figure 3 shows that a third of respondents, i.e., the discreet respondents, refused to reveal their partisan support even though the survey was conducted anonymously. A few respondents stated “privacy” and “vote is secret” as the reasons of their discretions. This is not uncommon as Ibrahim Suffian, the Director of Independent Pollster of Merdeka Center (as cited in Zurairi 2018) reported that nearly one in every three Malay respondents declined to indicate their partisan preferences or sentiments in the pre-election polls, which he deemed as part of a wider “cultural issue” in Malaysia where the public generally felt reluctant to disclose their political choices. It was highly likely that over half of the discreet respondents were loyal but “quiet” PAS voters, while the rest split between UMNO and PKR with the former’s voters constituting a large chunk of it. Perak is not a typical stronghold

state of PAS unlike Kelantan, and thus its base there is much smaller. This spurs many to avoid publicly declaring support for PAS and even conceal it so as to live harmoniously in neighbourhoods dominated by UMNO’s grassroots. This is in line with the “spiral of silence theory” that postulates the people’s tendency to avoid openly expressing views that are “divergent from the community (that) they belonged to”, particularly for the Malays (Ibrahim 2018). A similar scenario is also happening to some of the PKR’s Malay voters.

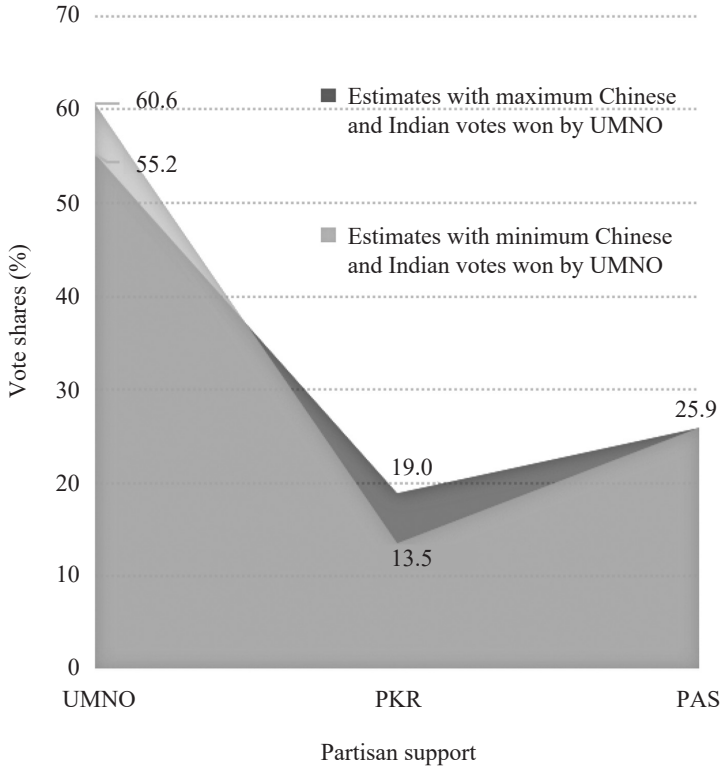


Figure 4: Estimates of Malay votes won by each party in N.43 Tualang Sekah.

Figures 5 and 6 show the partisan support by gender and age, respectively. Discreet respondents were omitted because of potential methodological bias in reassigning them to each party based on arbitrary assumptions. Hence, this is at best an analysis on all declared respondents, and not all respondents. The UMNO voters were predominantly women than men at a ratio of 6:4. This was probably due to the fact that the incumbent was an UMNO female leader who was also a state Exco member. This shows that the UMNO’s grassroots are bonded and consolidated by Malay women who form the backbone of the local

Malay community. This gender trend was possibly a continuation of a similar trend in GE13, as observed by Ibrahim (as cited in Zurairi 2013), that saw women generally leaning towards BN. Furthermore, UMNO did very well among older Malays who were over 50 years old by gaining over four-fifths of their votes. Remarkably, UMNO also did well among younger Malays between 21 and 50 years old by gaining either over half or around two-thirds of their votes. Therefore, UMNO prevailed over its opponents by securing the votes of both younger and older Malays.

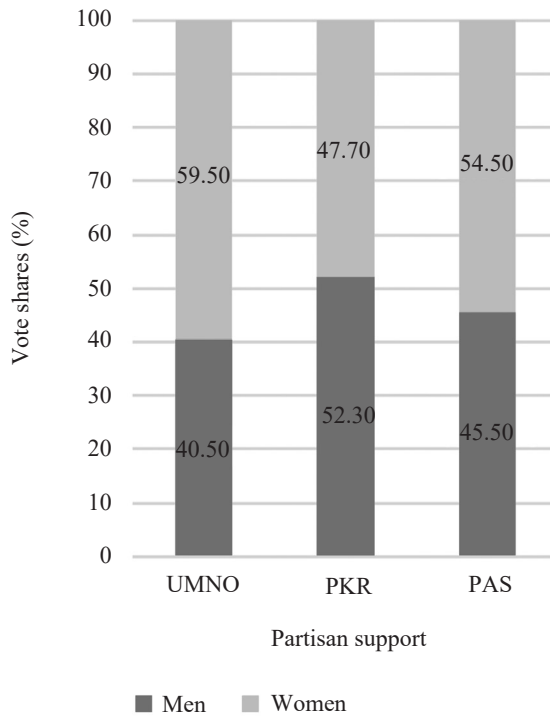


Figure 5: Declared respondents' partisan support by gender.

Next, PKR voters were split almost evenly between men and women. However, there was a significant generational gap as nearly 90% of self-declared PKR voters were between 21 and 50 years old. This was probably due to the appeal of a young Malay man as the PKR candidate. Thus, PKR voters skewed younger. Since UMNO had a huge edge among older Malays, PKR would need to secure the votes of younger Malays in order to win this seat. However, PKR's chance of victory in this seat was doomed when it lagged far behind UMNO in securing the votes of younger Malays between 21 and 50 years old. Lastly, although there

were more women than men who voted for PAS, this discrepancy was not as significant as it was with the UMNO voters. Since most of the PAS voters opted for discretion, it was difficult to discern any significant insight of its strength among different age groups.

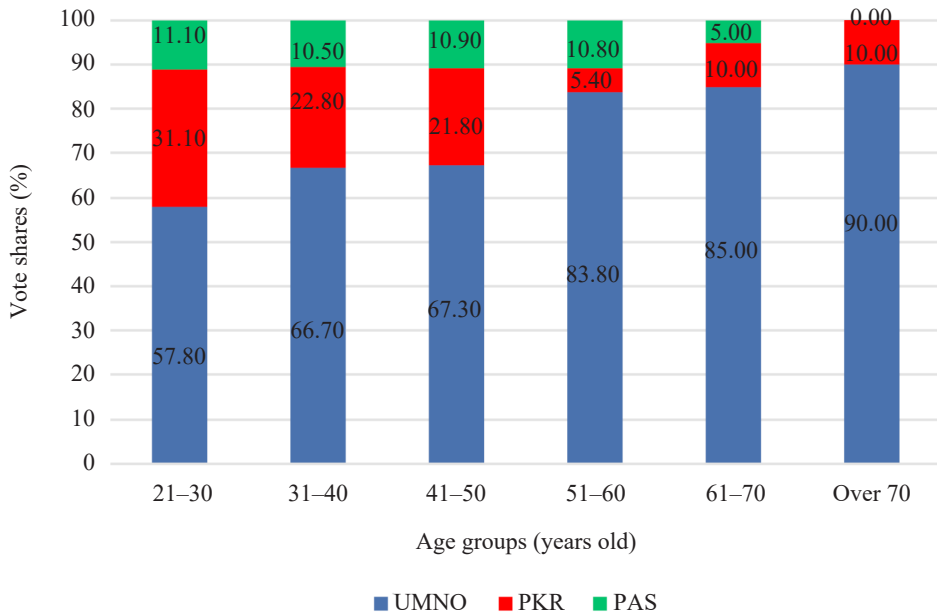


Figure 6: Declared respondents' partisan support by age groups.

Thirdly, a further analysis focused on the issues that the voters had considered when they cast their ballots in GE14 would be based on Figure 7. Nearly two-thirds of respondents identified the issues of economy and cost of living, making these the top two electoral issues in GE14. These were followed by four issues that roughly half of them had considered, i.e., the issues of Islam, Malay rights and status, GST and development. Other issues were less prominent, including the issue of Islamic *hudud* law. It is pertinent to note that herein the issue of economy, or the economic issue, refers to the general economic performance of Malaysia which is broader and wider than the more specific issues of the cost of living and GST. These findings were consistent with the Merdeka Center's (2017) findings from October 2016 to November 2017 that showed over two-thirds of the voters constantly ranked the economy as their top concern. Hence, the bread-and-butter issues eclipsed all other issues in GE14 (Serina 2018), including the constant issues pertaining to race and religion (Tay 2018).

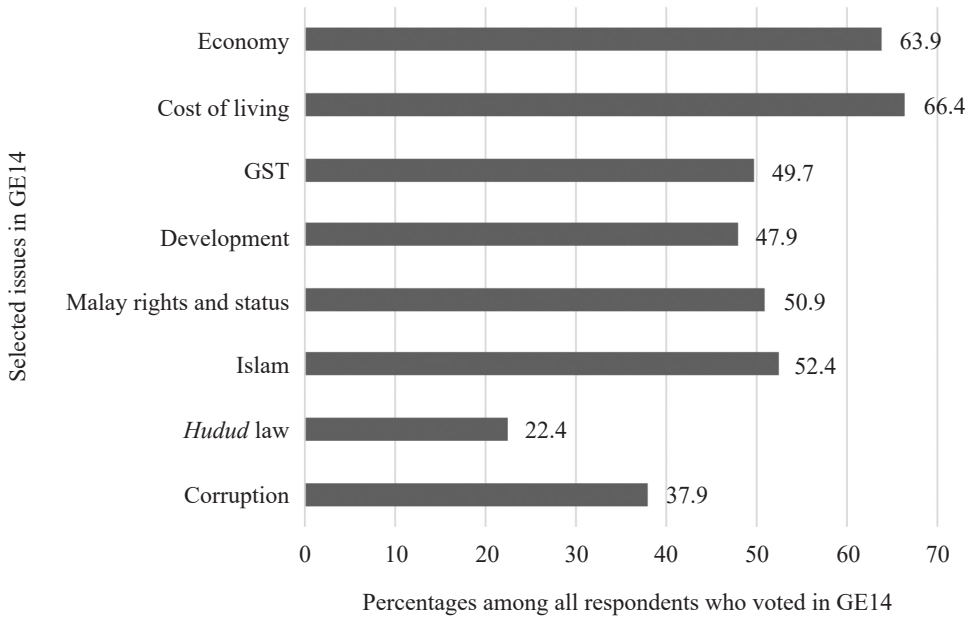


Figure 7: Selected issues considered by all respondents who voted in GE14.

Figure 8 takes it further by looking at the selected issues considered by all declared respondents in GE14. It shows that over two-thirds of UMNO voters had considered the issues of economy and cost of living while almost half had considered the issues of Islam, Malay rights and status, and development. These were the typical issues that fired up the UMNO voters in a rural Malay-majority seat with many B40 (bottom 40% of population with the lowest income) voters. Serina (2018) noted that rural Malays were inclined to vote along racial lines, and BN had historically succeeded in convincing them that a vote for the opposition would infringe Malay rights and the status of Islam. Although such issues resonated with many UMNO voters, they were not their top concerns. Furthermore, not many voters were concerned with the issue of GST as much as other respondents. Only four-tenths of UMNO voters had considered it. They did not pay much consideration to the corruption issue as well, with seven in every ten ignoring it. The share of UMNO voters who had considered either issue was also the least of all three parties. Therefore, the last two issues clearly did not resonate with most of the UMNO voters which blunted the effectiveness of PH's campaign rhetoric in this seat.

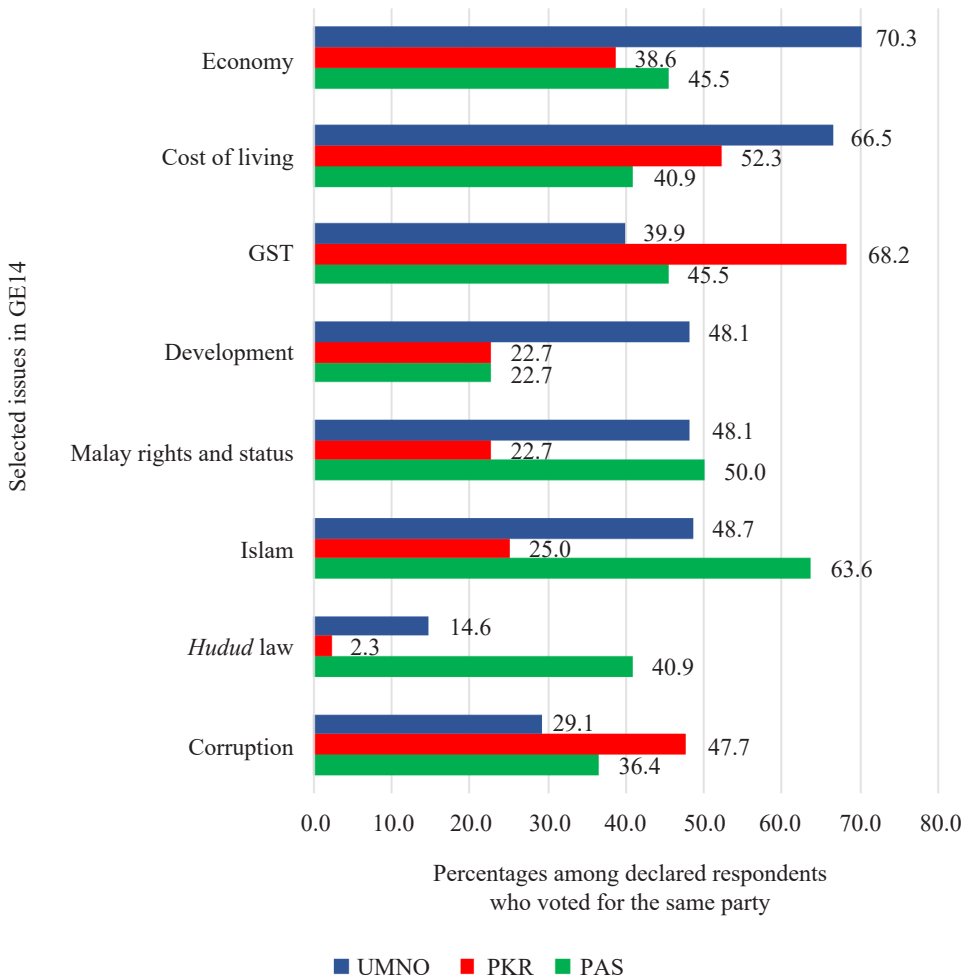


Figure 8: Selected issues considered by all declared respondents in GE14.

In contrast, over two-thirds of PKR voters had considered the GST issue while nearly half of them had considered the corruption issue. Along with the issue of the cost of living which had been considered by over half of them, these were the top three electoral issues that resonated with them. Therefore, the main themes of PH’s campaign clearly animated their voters in GE14. However, fewer PKR voters had considered the economic issue, the least of all three parties. So, it seems that PKR voters were more concerned with the issues of GST and the cost of living than the general economic performance. Moreover, the developmental, racial and religious issues were not their top concerns. For some, PH had astutely turned GE14 into a referendum on soaring cost of living and worsening

corruption, and both issues resonated with voters (Cheng, Ng and Faris 2018). Nevertheless, this study found that while the former had obviously struck a chord with the Malay voters in general, the latter languished as an afterthought because only a third of respondents had considered the corruption issue (see Figure 7). Serina (2018) suggested that there was a possible urban-rural divide as the urban voters were more keenly concerned with the corruption issue than the rural voters. Ibrahim (as cited in Tay 2018) concurred and added that the urban middle-class voters were upset about corruption while rising cost of living was the issue that resonated with voters across the board. Therefore, PH's two-pronged strategy in attacking BN over economic and corruption issues in GE14 did not work too well in this seat.

The findings above show that the heated issues pertaining to the management of the slowing economy, the unpopular GST, and the rising cost of living trounced the parochial sentiments based on race and religion in GE14. Those who had considered the heated issues engaged in economic voting while those who had considered the parochial sentiments engaged in value voting. Therefore, economic voting seems to trump value voting in GE14. Rafizi (as cited in *The Straits Times* 2018) argued that PH won GE14 due to economic voting by enough Malay voters. Yet, Weiss (2018b) contended that to better understand economic voting in Malaysia, we must consider "which party voters trust to manage the economy", and for most of the Malay voters, they trusted UMNO to safeguard their economic well-being. Among those who had considered the economic issue in GE14, 52.6% voted for UMNO, 8.1% voted for PKR, 4.7% voted for PAS, and over a third of them were unknown due to their discretions. Over half of the Malay voters in N.43 Tualang Sekah who had considered the economic issues obviously had more faith in the incumbent's ability, rather than the challengers', in dealing with such issues. This was most likely due to the gender gaps in favour of women on the issues of economy, cost of living, and GST at 14%, 4%, and 8%, respectively. Furthermore, parochial sentiments were more likely to resonate with older Malays than younger Malays, with a difference of 22% between those who are 21 and 70 years old. UMNO prevailed over PKR in winning the votes of both female and older Malays, thereby allowing them to retain the seat.

On the other hand, PAS voters had a different inclination than other voters. Merely 40%–46% of them had considered the issues of economy, cost of living and GST, yet none of which was a majority, unlike a majority of UMNO and PKR voters who had considered at least two of those three issues. In fact, the top two electoral issues for them were the issues of Islam and Malay rights and status, which were considered by nearly two-thirds and exactly half of them, respectively. Therefore, most of the PAS voters engaged in value voting by

prioritising racial and religious issues. In every 20 PAS voters, 10 to 13 of them engaged in value voting while only eight to nine of them engaged in economic voting. This shows that the PAS' base had responded positively towards these two typical rural Malay issues. Nevertheless, only 40.9% of them had considered the *hudud* law. This shows that while PAS voters were generally animated by Islamic issues, fewer of them were keen to consider the more specific Islamic policy in GE14.

DISCUSSION

Judging from the consolidated two-party system in Perak and post-GE14 dynamics and trends so far, the Silver State is on track to another heated campaign in the prospective 15th General Election (GE15) of Malaysia. The main battleground is still going to be the rural Malay-majority seats like N.43 Tualang Sekah. Yet, a few uncertainties await the parties and candidates that may turn out to be great opportunities for them to retain or gain the seat and the state administration or conversely, great risks that cost them victory and power. The following discussions focus on every competing party.

First, BN/UMNO's campaigns in N.43 Tualang Sekah were dominated by banners that heavily featured Dato' Sri Najib, instead of Dato' Nolee Ashilin, along with the reliance on party and governmental machineries in consolidating its grassroots support. UMNO is expected to continue co-opting governmental machinery for its campaigns and holding on to its patronage network since it has returned to power after PH was ousted from the Perak state administration in March 2020 and UMNO's assemblyperson, Datuk Saarani Mohamad, was sworn in as the new chief minister in December 2020. UMNO can still count on its loyalists as many have continued to stick with the party through thick and thin. This is crucial as UMNO will need to rely on its grassroots in future campaigns, especially in rural seats where extensive interpersonal network is the key to reach out to and win the support of voters because of the geographical barriers and logistical difficulty.

There are two risks that UMNO does need to mitigate in order to hold on to the seat and win Perak in GE15. The first risk is concerning the next candidate to replace Dato' Nolee Ashilin as the BN candidate as she was expelled from UMNO on 14 May 2018 after she supported Dato' Seri Ahmad Faizal, her brother-in-law, as the new chief minister. Local leaders jockeying for position as the new candidate may trigger backbiting and sabotage among UMNO members. Nevertheless, opportunity arises if they coalesce around the strongest or a

consensus candidate and when palpable anger and lingering resentment among the grassroots of UMNO due to Dato' Nolee Ashilin's defection lead to their heightened enthusiasm and then higher turnout rates. The second risk is whether any form of UMNO-PAS cooperation may become counterproductive since it almost certainly entails giving up seats so that both do not contest for the same seats. Due to the decades-old rivalry between the parties, some UMNO supporters may loathe it so much so that they may decide to skip GE15 altogether. However, opportunity arises when the supporters for both parties are united by a common enemy and their eagerness to prevent PH from winning.

Second, PH/PKR's campaigns were characterised by walkabouts, programmes, and rallies that featured party heavyweights, and a heavy reliance on cyber campaigns to counteract the dominance of BN in machinery, money and media. However, the walkabouts were not that extensive for it to be effective as many Malay residential areas simply did not welcome PH's campaigns there, and there is little evidence that this will change for the better in GE15. Party heavyweights will still headline some PH/PKR programmes and rallies, but Perak and N.43 Tualang Sekah are unlikely to receive more attentions vis-à-vis other more prominent front-line states and marginal seats. Cyber campaigns may also become a double-edged sword that harms PH/PKR in GE15 as they need to defend themselves from harsh criticisms against their track record of governance at both levels of government. Such scenarios do not bode well for PH/PKR's goal to hold on to its Malay votes as it is possible that the reverse may occur, and not to mention its aspiration to win a bigger share of Malay votes. However, PH/PKR can still count on its substantial base – the coalition between the non-Malay voters and the moderate Malay voters – in this marginal seat that has largely remained stable since GE12. This is imperative as without such a base, there is little chance for PH/PKR to flip this seat, especially since its likely opponent in GE15 is the combined might of UMNO and PAS.

On the other hand, Weiss (2018b) observed that the votes for PH were cast by both proactive voters who championed reforms and reactive voters who loathed an unpopular leader but not more than that, and that PH must retain both to win. PH/PKR faces two risks in its quest to capture N.43 Tualang Sekah. The first risk is concerning its ability to secure the support of its proactive voters who favour reforms as many – particularly its bedrock of support among non-Malay voters – have become wavering in their support and even turn sour on PH due to a series of public spat, infightings, policy reversals, and controversies. This will

likely dampen their enthusiasm and drive down their turnout rates to some extent. The second risk is concerning its ability to consolidate the support of its reactive voters who may ditch PH due to the guilt of toppling the BN governments at both federal and state levels and the allegations that PH is dominated by DAP and Chinese while Malay rights and the statuses of Malays and Islam have been weakened during the PH rule. The lack of perceived improvement in their livelihoods, the government's debts, and the economy along with the rising cost of living will likely turn many against PH. However, PH might see an opening to secure the votes of some UMNO and PAS voters who loathe their parties' cooperation and who doubt and disbelieve those allegations with racial or religious undertones.

Lastly, regardless of the state of PAS' campaigns in GE14, it is far from certain of the forms and impacts of the prospective UMNO-PAS cooperation since it may only be finalised when GE15 is imminent. Even by then many details will not be known and ironed out, just like what occurred to PH in the run-up to GE14. PAS may claim this seat and ask BN to stand down by arguing that it stands a better chance to consolidate the voters of both parties as many may feel betrayed by Dato' Nolee Ashilin's defection. UMNO may dispute this by arguing that it has a bigger base between the two parties and has never lost the seat before. Yet, multipartism in the parliamentary system of Malaysia necessitates vote pooling and seat sharing in a give-and-take manner. Thus, N.43 Tualang Sekah is likely one of the seats up for bargaining between UMNO and PAS in GE15 if and when their cooperation entails seat negotiations.

There are three risks of fielding a PAS candidate instead of an UMNO candidate. The first risk is the undetermined scale of protest and sabotage from some UMNO leaders or voters in GE15. The second risk is the uncertain scale of backlash from voters who voted for PAS in GE14 as the protest votes against UMNO who detest any UMNO-PAS cooperation. The last risk is the uphill battle to secure the votes of the non-Malay voters. These mean that the turnout rates of the voters for both parties may drop in GE15 while some may even go as far as voting for the PKR candidate. As PKR is likely to hold on to roughly 40% of vote share, PAS has little room for error. Nonetheless, opportunity arises if the rhetoric of "Malay-Muslim unity" embodied by the National Consensus (Muafakat Nasional) – the informal alliance between UMNO and PAS – successfully galvanises a large segment of Malay voters to vote against PH and thus allowing PAS to win this seat for the first time.

CONCLUSION

In the quest to either keep or capture Perak in GE15, every marginal seat matters. Malay votes will be critical in winning such marginal seats since there is little chance and evidence so far that non-Malays may swing away from PH in large numbers. Perhaps more importantly is that whether the Malay voters will again prioritise economic voting with strong concerns over the economy and cost of living, rather than value voting that reeks of identity politics with strong racial and religious undertones. If PH were to fail to blunt the force of ethnonationalist fears and paranoia, many voters in the rural Malay-majority seats would be likely to vote against it by voting for either UMNO, PPBM or PAS. If UMNO, PPBM and PAS were to fail to ameliorate voters' economic woes, their rule may thus go down in flames not only in Perak but also throughout the country.

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