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LOCALISING VICTORY: GE 14 AND THE ELECTORAL CONTESTS IN JOHOR AND KELANTAN

The 14th Malaysian Election heralded a new dawn for Malaysian politics and society. The change of government was not predicted by observers of Malaysian politics and came as a surprise for many. Two states in particular stood out in the election as a misnomer, the states of Kelantan and Johor. The cases of Kelantan and Johor are interesting for a number of reasons. First, these states are considered stronghold states of the two Malay based political parties, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). Second, the results in both states were largely unexpected with most observers predicting that UMNO will retain Johor and that PAS will lose Kelantan. Lastly, both states can be described as ‘maverick’ states. Under Malaysia’s current federal system, these states have historically manifested a strong independent streak. In the case of Johor, the bangsa Johor, a kind of state level nationalism that is centred around a Johorean identity can be observed whereas in the case of Kelantan, the conception of Kelantan as an abode of Islam has shaped the Kelantanese identity. This paper examines how both states that demonstrated similar localized election strategies yielded divergent results, with Kelantan continuing to support PAS while Johor abandoned UMNO-BN.

Keywords: *Johor, Kelantan, Royalty, Islam, PAS, UMNO, Pakatan Harapan.*

Introduction

The 14th Malaysian Election heralded a new dawn for Malaysian politics and society. The change of government was not predicted by observers of Malaysian politics and came as a surprise for many. In an election of many surprises, the two outcomes of Kelantan and Johor were particularly interesting. First, these states are considered stronghold states of the two Malay based political parties, the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). Second, the results in both states were largely not predicted with most observers predicting that UMNO will retain Johor and that PAS will lose Kelantan (or PAS will have its support reduced significantly). Lastly, both states can be described as ‘maverick’ states. Under Malaysia’s current federated system, these states have historically manifested

a strong independence streak. In the case of Johor, the *bangsa Johor*, a kind of state level nationalism that is centred around a Johorean identity can be observed whereas in the case of Kelantan, the conception of Kelantan as an abode of Islam has shaped the Kelantanese identity. Election strategies in both states saw heavy use of a localized narrative from the incumbents (PAS and UMNO), focusing on local politics and the popularity of the respective state governments over issues at the federal level. This paper examines how this approach produced divergent results: with a win for PAS in Kelantan where they were expected to fail, while UMNO-BN suffered a heavy defeat in Johor. It is argued in this paper, that the identity factor, while not the sole factor for electoral results in Johor and Kelantan, was instrumental in shaping the outcome.

There are three parts of the paper. First, the paper will examine the way the different political parties employed national figures in their campaigns in Johor and Kelantan. Second, the paper will examine the way different parties focused on the important local issues. In Johor, the focus was on local candidates and issues whereas in Kelantan the local candidates were fielded at the state level while the national candidates came from the PAS top leadership. Last, the paper will examine the role of the royal family in Johor and Kelantan. The paper begins with a quick discussion on *bangsa Johor* and the pre-election conditions in the state to provide context for the analysis. It will then consider how local politics affected both coalitions, particularly in terms of their choice of candidates and how these candidates sought to address local and federal issues. Attention will then shift toward Najib Razak and Mahathir Mohamed, and how these individuals as leaders of their respective coalitions affected and influenced the decisions of local voters. The Johor and Kelantanese royal family will also receive attention considering the influence they wield in Johor political and social life. Finally, this section will analyse the election results in Johor and Kelantan. This section will consider in what ways did BN specifically lose the election in Johor, and how PH managed to fill these gaps, concluding that despite efforts to localize the election on both sides, it was ultimately won by PH due to federal discontent with BN. Likewise, it will assess the election results in Kelantan and consider in what ways PAS was able to retain the state. Despite, efforts to localize the campaign by PH, BN and PAS, the PAS' campaign was more effective in localizing the message. Fieldwork was conducted over a two month period before and after the elections through numerous interviews with candidates, party workers and voters while observations were gathered in Johor particularly during the campaign period by attending several *ceramahs* for both BN, PH and PAS.

Background: The Battle for Johor and Kelantan

Historically, Johor has always been a state that has seen itself almost as

a maverick and under Malaysia's current federated system one of the ways this is pronounced is in the manifestation of *bangsa Johor*; a kind of state level nationalism that is centred around a Johorean identity. Coming into the election, Johor was already attracting significant interest due to media hype about it being a potential battleground state. This development is noticeable, if mainly for the fact Johor has largely been considered an UMNO stronghold and one that has proven difficult to break. UMNO's association with Johor is longstanding, being the birthplace of the party and the producer of many of the country's top leaders.¹ This has persisted despite Johor operating as something of an outlier post-2008 and 2013, as a developed state with a mixed demographic that has remained as a bastion for UMNO-BN support, where other states with a similar makeup such as Penang or Selangor, have long become opposition territory. As much as the state has remained Barisan Nasional (BN) territory, parties such as PAS have struggled to make any inroads over the years. This is not for a lack of highly concentrated Malay constituencies, as the Eastern Johor seats of Tenggara, Pengerang and Mersing can testify. Rather seats with high Malay majority tend to house FELDA settlements which have traditionally been UMNO voting blocs in the past. Additionally, Johor's proximity to Singapore lends an additional complication as sharing a border with another country has a direct and indirect influence on the state, whether economically or culturally. Many Johoreans, as many as 400,000, work in Singapore while in recent years, traffic between the two countries has increased significantly with Malaysians seeking higher wages and Singaporeans looking for cheaper goods and services.²

Finally, the presence of a very active royal family in Johor adds another layer of complexity to the dynamics of local politics and how these in turn affect developments at the national level. The Sultan of Johor and the royal family have many active investments in their state, while participate in politics and current affairs far more frequently than their counterparts from across the country, regularly opting to flex their political muscle. Johor's growth as an economic powerhouse has similarly been mirrored by developments in the political arena. Johor is Malaysia's third largest state, housing over 3 million people and has a fairly mixed population of 60% Malay, 33% Chinese and 7% Indian. This is complemented by a level of urbanization of over 70% making it a reasonably developed state, with initiatives such as the Iskandar Puteri township and the Pengerang Integrated Petroleum Complex as standard bearers for Johor's larger role in the nation's economy.³ According to the Sultan, Ibrahim Sultan Iskandar, *Bangsa Johor* as a concept originated from his great-grandfather in 1920 as a way to "give thanks and unite the various races" in Johor, promoting togetherness and inclusivity.⁴ After the elections in 2013 which saw a further weakening of Barisan Nasional, the sultans saw an opportunity for themselves to carve out greater space for themselves in the public sphere, participating more in political and social issues.⁵ This was

especially true of the Johor Sultan, who became more engaging in public life. *Bangsa Johor* has been used to argue against religious extremism and racial polarization, two issues the Johor royal family are particularly critical of, actively galvanizing Johoreans under their state identity against exclusivism.⁶ The Sultan has been effective in the promotion of this identity, with a survey indicating nine out of ten Johoreans identify strongly with the *bangsa Johor* identity.⁷ Johoreans tend to have a positive outlook on the royal family seeing them as good custodians of moderation and interethnic harmony, despite harbouring questions about their numerous investments and business dealings.⁸

Like Johor, Kelantan has many unique features. The state was long held by PAS since 1990. Despite the lack of development in the state which is noticeable, the Kelantanese populace has been steadfast in their support for PAS. Much like UMNO's association with Johor, PAS' seems synonymous with Kelantan given that much of PAS top leaders hail from the state. The party also gained a foothold in the state as early as 1959 when PAS won control of the state government and the fact that for much of its modern history, PAS has governed Kelantan. Since 2008, PAS has used its base in Kelantan to expand its influence in the northern states which has increased significantly after the party took control of Kedah in 2008 and nearly captured Terengganu in 2013. Kelantan has also been deemed to be an abode of Islam which is governed by true Islamic teachings. Perhaps unlike the Johorean royal family which overtly expressed their political views, the Kelantanese royal family has been more covert in the way they expressed their political preference. However, the acrimonious relationship between the Kelantanese royal family and Dr Mahathir Mohamed during his first terms as Prime Minister of Malaysia is widely known.

These ingredients together make for both states as fascinating case studies in the 2018 general elections. In studying Johor and Kelantan exceptionalism, a key theme emerges: how far is politics 'local' in both states, and how did this affect the outcome of the elections? This section suggests due to the Johorean tradition of *bangsa Johor*, a tradition well known to both Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Harapan, the election was lost due to a failure to address issues at the local level, despite a concerted effort to be perceived as a 'local' party. With *bangsa Johor* in mind, both BN and PH tailored much of their strategy in the state to match this ideal in order to best appeal to voters. It suggests that although some of these strategies were reproduced elsewhere in the country as a focus on local politics is a common electoral strategy, various factors in Johor as discussed above make approaches in the state unique, especially considering the election result which saw BN lose power. This paper demonstrates how this was achieved in three ways: through the choice of candidates, the manner in which Najib Razak and Mahathir were accommodated by both coalitions, and the influence of the royal family on voting decisions. Like Johor, the conception of the Serambi Makkah which defines the Islamic

character of Kelantan and remains a key thrust of the Kelantanese identity was utilized by both UMNO and PAS. Several factors including the centrality of Islam to Kelantanese, the manner in the legacy of Nik Aziz Nik Mat, PAS' former spiritual leader, was employed and the influence of the royal family had an impact on voting outcomes.

Accommodating Najib and Mahathir Into The Narratives

The usage of coalition leaders Najib Razak and Mahathir Mohamed in election narratives provides a clear indication of the approach from respective incumbents in Kelantan and Johor. In Johor for instance, as the campaign throughout the country became decidedly presidential and personality driven and framed as a contest essentially between Najib Razak and Mahathir Mohamed, more of BN's campaign began to revolve around the prime minister and the successes of his administration. The dominance of Najib as part of BN's campaign narrative was detrimental to BN Johor who actively sought to distance themselves from his administration, while playing up their own, evident in campaign material throughout the state which avoided using his name or image. This approach was feasible as the state government and local leaders were popular amongst Johoreans, while Najib's own popularity in the state offered no guarantees. Najib himself refrained from visiting Johor during the campaign period, perhaps cognizant of the damage it might cause to their chances. BN Johor had their own manifesto, that although not dissimilar with BN's aims at the national level, focused very specifically and comprehensively on local solutions to local problems.⁹ However, distancing themselves from the federal government prevent BN Johor's narrative from resonating and unifying with the narrative in Peninsular Malaysia, a factor which contributed to its overall incoherency especially in contrast to PH. BN Johor was reliant on the successes of the state government to win over voters but importantly, were unable to address major concerns relevant to Johorean such as cost of living, GST played directly into the hands of PH who centered their campaign directly on these issues.¹⁰ This lack of engagement, although understandable given the perception that BN was responsible for these problems in the first place, ultimately proved costly as voters struggled to resonate with BN.

The popularity of Mahathir has tended to be more mixed in Johor. Although still popular with Malays (with many eventually leaving UMNO for Bersatu), a fair number in the state believe him to have betrayed the ideals of UMNO and the country by leaving the party. Mahathir's image was not helped by Muhyiddin Yassin of Bersatu either, who had a mixed track record during his time as chief minister of the state and thus not wholly popular in Johor especially in the South. It is notable that Mahathir made one appearance in Pasir Gudang at a mass rally before Nomination Day.¹¹ Mahathir has famously clashed with the Johor royal family in the past, and more recently questioned

the need for *bangsa Johor*.¹² This alongside Chinese distrust of Mahathir saw DAP *ceramahs* regularly calling Mahathir a ‘tool’ employed to win the elections. Clearly, throughout the campaign period PH candidates treated the issue of Mahathir very carefully, concerned that local sentiment may work against them should they shower his name with praise.

Similar to Johor, both Mahathir and Najib were subjects that were avoided in Kelantan. The one figure that was prominently featured throughout the campaign is the late spiritual leader of PAS, Nik Aziz Nik Mat. PAS constructed their campaign as defending the legacy of Nik Aziz. Under Nik Aziz, PAS constructed UMNO as morally and politically anti-Islam and corrupt.¹³ PAS sought to replace UMNO’s tainted ‘corrupt’ politics with an Islamic system. Nik Aziz was admired by many Kelantanese who hailed his inclusive leadership. As such, one of the key issues of competition during the campaign in Kelantan was over the legacy of Nik Aziz. Both PAS and Amanah claimed to be the true inheritors of Nik Aziz’s legacy. This was perhaps worsened by the fact that both his sons, Nik Abdul Nik Aziz and Nik Omar Nik Aziz were fielded as candidates by PAS and Amanah respectively. In the drama that follows, Nik Aziz’s widow, Puan Sabariah Tuan Ishak spoke in a highly emotional video in which she described her son Nik Omar as ‘anak derhaka’ or an unfilial child for going against her late husband’s legacy of striving for Islam through PAS. Her support for PAS was further emphasized when she accompanied Nik Abdul to the nomination centre in support of his candidacy. In a widely shared social media post, photos of Nik Abdul getting his blessings from Puan Sabariah was juxtaposed against that of Nik Omar described as an ungrateful child.¹⁴ This came as a big blow for PH, as the coalition had touted Nik Omar as a successor to Nik Aziz.¹⁵ Members of Nik Aziz’s family continued supporting PAS and prevented Dr. Mahathir who was on a campaign trail in Kelantan from visiting Nik Aziz’s grave. The family felt that allowing Mahathir to visit the grave would lead to divisiveness within the Muslim community in Kelantan.¹⁶

On the part of Amanah and PH, they were careful not to associate the coalition too closely to Mahathir. For many Kelantanese, Mahathir’s antagonistic attitude towards Muslim conservatives and dictatorial leadership style had had negative consequences for the PAS led government in Kelantan. One of the key policies of the first Mahathir administration was to cease all payment of oil royalties to the state government which many Kelantanese view as a transgression of their rights. Mahathir had also chastised PAS leaders as fanatics and backward. While acknowledging the poor image of Mahathir, PH had instead relied on the image of two key PAS leaders namely, Nik Omar as noted earlier and that of Husam Musa, who was once deemed as a successor to Nik Aziz. This attempt was largely unsuccessful as PH was completely wiped out from Kelantan failing to win a single seat and even losing the electoral deposit in many seats.

For BN Kelantan, PM Najib was largely deemed as a liability. While the 1MDB scandal did not get much attention or traction from Kelantanese, UMNO in Kelantan focused more strongly on the image of the head of UMNO Kelantan, Mustapa Mohamed. His name was floated as BN's candidate for the coveted Menteri Besar post should BN win Kelantan. Mustapa who was deemed as a pious, incorruptible leader was featured in most lectures organized by the BN and made many electoral promises aimed at uplifting the economic position of Kelantan. This included building the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) linking Port Klang to Pengkalan Kubor in Kelantan and building a new stadium in Kota Bharu if BN wins. These projects were projected as aimed at creating more jobs for Kelantanese and improving their standard of living. As part of BN's strategy to position Mustapha as the next chief minister, the federal government announced the renaming of the Medan Ilmu to Dataran Tok Pa.¹⁷ This move was symbolic due to the fact that the square was associated closely with Nik Aziz who conducted his Friday prayers sermons at the location. This was seen by PAS members as representing an effort to undermine the legacy of Nik Aziz. Many Kelantanese did not view this move positively with many expressing their unhappiness during conversations held with local Kelantanese during the campaign period. In sum, in Kelantan, the political giants that featured prominently were local Kelantanese politicians. The success of PAS could be partly attributed to the successful employment of the figure of Nik Aziz and the positioning of PAS Kelantan leaders such as Nik Abduh and the chief minister Ahmad Yaakob as the successors to the legacy of Nik Aziz was instrumental in shaping the outcome of the battle. The nomination of Tok Pa as the MB candidate for BN made little difference to the outcome of the electoral competition in Kelantan and in the case of PH, the nomination of Nik Omar did nothing to influence the outcome in its favour. The glaring absence of major national figures such as Dr Mahathir and former PM Najib were a reflection of the little traction that they enjoyed amongst voters in Kelantan.

Choosing Candidates And Strategizing At The Local Level

Another way in which the local was emphasized was through candidate selection. BN particularly emphasized their candidates as local Johoreans born and bred in the constituencies they were contesting, such as Jason Teoh, the MCA candidate for the Iskandar Puteri parliamentary seat, alongside his state seat candidates MIC's S Kanan and Mohd Khairi Malik. Collectively they are referred to as *anak jati Gelang Patah*, a point that is especially made in opposition to incumbent Lim Kit Siang of the DAP, whom BN criticize as a parachute candidate.¹⁸ Similar local virtues are advocated elsewhere in Johor through candidates like Khaled Nordin, born in Muar and Shahrir Samad, a non-local but one has been involved in Johor Bahru for decades. These leaders enjoyed genuine grassroots support, ably seen whenever either of them are in

public spaces. Local issues featured prominently, whether pledges to resolve traffic issues in Gelang Patah or initiatives for Malaysian babies and toddlers. This demonstrates how Johor BN candidates have played up the local factor while blurring the lines between their own achievements and that of *muafakat Johor*, BN's attempt to bandwagon on *bangsa Johor* as a means to acquire votes in the election. BN candidates hardly had to stray further from the successes of the state government in attempting to win voters already hypersensitive to local issues and their own state identity. In this vein, *ceramahs*, especially those in low-cost housing areas, focused on 'maintaining stability' as their primary narrative.

PH also similarly sought to embrace the state-level nationalism of *bangsa Johor*. Candidates were fielded because of their Johor links: Syed Saddiq of Johor Bahru contested in Muar and Yeo Bee Yin contested in her native Bakri. References were made toward their local credentials, but parallels were not drawn too much with *bangsa Johor*, perhaps wary of conflating their efforts with BN's existing *muafakat Johor*. Attention towards local issues was present but not exceptional, with much time devoted to federal issues such as the GST or corruption scandals of the past administration. This is not to suggest *ceramahs* and campaign material were devoid of Johor issues, as evidenced by a video released by Muar candidate Syed Saddiq highlighting the difficulties associated with working and travelling daily to Singapore.¹⁹

In Kelantan, the importance of local candidates at the parliamentary level was less pronounced. Indeed, for many Kelantanese, they have seen significant number of PAS candidates who were fielded in Kelantan but hailed from other states. The focus for PAS has been to ensure that local candidates are fielded at the state assembly and that its key leaders are fielded in seats that are deemed to be safe seats. A number of PAS leaders including Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man, the party's deputy president was fielded in Kelantan. Despite this, most PAS leaders are familiar with Kelantanese socio-economic and political conditions due to the centrality of Kelantan in the party's politics. PAS' campaign was centered around two key themes that found traction among many Kelantanese. First, the party appealed to the sense of independence that many Kelantanese are proud of. PAS leaders argued passionately that Kelantanese do not rely for help from others and that the BN government cannot 'buy' the independence of Kelantanese by offering developmental plans. Second, the defense of the Kelantanese Islamic identity was employed by the PAS leadership. For many Kelantanese, religion and politics are inseparable. Being cognizant of this reality, the chief minister of Kelantan, Ahmad Yaakob declared an electoral *jihād* (holy struggle) to defend the state and the party's tagline is *Rise to Defend Kelantan* (Bangkit Pertahanan Kelantan). Ahmad Yaakob claim that Kelantanese must defend Kelantan as "*Serambi Makkah*" (the verandah of Makkah) and the last bastion of true Islam in Malaysia appealed to many voters. Such positioning was extremely powerful in appealing to issues that

are deemed to be close to the hearts of many Kelantanese. Despite the constant rhetoric by the BN leadership about the lack of development in the state, many Kelantanese highlighted the fact that a number of hyper-marts including Aeon, Tesco and Giant have opened up in Kelantan and this could be contrasted with the lack of any similar facilities in the neighboring UMNO led Terengganu. Some Kelantanese interviewed also noted that the Kelantanese economic condition is not as bleak as portrayed by the BN government as the official economic statistics fail to account for the remittances sent from Kelantanese living in other parts of Malaysia.²⁰ Thus, UMNO's emphasis on development ran hollow for many Kelantanese.

Role Of The Royal Families

Although royal families are considered apolitical, their influence in Johor and Kelantan proved intriguing, demonstrating how their own positions indirectly reflect political leanings which may in turn influence voters. Given the reverence of the Sultan in Johor and his regular engagement with socio-political issues, it is no surprise that the royal family was a highly influential factor in the elections. Interestingly, it was expected that Johoreans would adhere to or align themselves with the Sultan's position when the opposite occurred. In early April following Pakatan Harapan's rally in Pasir Gudang, the Crown Prince of Johor Tunku Ismail Sultan Ibrahim launched a veiled against Mahathir on the Facebook page of the Johor Southern Tigers Football Club.²¹ In the statement, he warned Johoreans to be wary of the 'forked tongue individual' who sought to curb the powers of the royalty, damage royal institutions, and disband the Johor Military Force. He also referenced personal stories, including that of Private Adam who ran amok with an assault rifle in 1987 as an act of revenge for the death of his younger brother who was allegedly murdered by the then Sultan of Johor, Sultan Iskandar Ibni Almarhum Sultan Ismail.²² His lengthy statement ended by urging Johoreans not to be deceived (by Dr Mahathir) and to put their trust in him (the Sultan), as he knew what he was doing, while also saying "Don't change the boat if the engine is not broken, don't even change the skipper but allow HM The Sultan of Johor and I guide the skipper for you". Johoreans reacted extremely negatively toward the perceived bias of the crown prince. As the royalty are expected to be politically impartial, with immediate members of the royal family not allowed to vote, the crown prince's open contempt for Mahathir rankled Malaysians who expressed their feelings on social media. These comments disagreed with the crown prince, stating that it was the right of Malaysians to decide their own political future while suggesting that perhaps the royal family was out of touch with the socio-political reality in Malaysia. *Facebook* data indicated that this episode caused impacted many individuals politically, reflecting the significance it had on voters' opinions.²³ Many took issue with the various intimate anecdotes of

disdain against Mahathir which displayed a personal contempt instead of a professional disagreement with the former prime minister. The crown prince himself appeared to recognize the unpopularity of his opinions and sought to rectify his actions by releasing another statement the day after, which did little to placate the mood.²⁴ A few days later, he turned up at a shopping mall and spent more than RM1million buying groceries for others.²⁵ The reaction and position of the Johor royal family particularly over this episode in the run up to the election, ably demonstrates the primacy of the sultan in Johor daily life. Although not normal for a member of a state royal family to openly support or condemn any political side, the rhetoric of the crown prince was consistent particularly with BN, namely a strong focus on local politics and issues as the main driving force behind voter decision-making. The reiteration of *Bangsa Johor* as a uniting concept plays into this narrative, one that is easily conflated with BN's *muafakat Johor* slogan.

The Kelantanese royal family similarly was an important factor in the battle for Kelantan. The Sultan is a popular figure within the state and maintain close relationship with the Kelantanese people. The relationship between the palace and the PAS led state government of Kelantan has long been friendly. A number of key PAS leaders including the late Nik Aziz acted as religious guide to members of the royal family.²⁶ On the other hand, UMNO's relationship with the royal family has been fret with tension especially when Dr Mahathir was Prime Minister. In a much-publicized campaign against previous Sultan, Ismail Petra, Mahathir has accused the Sultan of smuggling for on the basis that he did not pay custom duties for cars that were imported by the Sultan. Mahathir had also supported a plot to replace the then Sultan with his cousin.²⁷ As such, the decision by the Sultan to revoke the Datukship of Amanah vice-president Husam Musa and state chairman Wan Abdul Rahim Wan Abdullah as well the stripping of the DK (Darjah Kerabat Al-Yunus) title from Dr Mahathir did not come as a surprise. It was reported that the palace was alarmed by Amanah's alleged promotion of the uncle of the Sultan, Tengku Mohamed Tengku Yahya Petra who had joined the party, to infer that the Kelantanese royal family could potentially support Amanah.²⁸ While the Sultan himself did not explicitly state his political preference for any party, it was a clear message to many Kelantanese that the Sultan did not want Amanah to helm the state of Kelantan. While the Sultan has been less explicit in his political pronouncement, many within PAS rejoiced at this move which was interpreted as a tacit support for the party by the royal family. Many Kelantanese also interpreted the move as a clear indication that the Sultan had rejected PH and Amanah.

Results And Analysis Of GE14

PH captured the majority of the non-Malay vote and used this as a solid

platform for winning seats especially in mixed areas. Along with a 15-20% swing in the Malay vote to PH, this helped contribute to the fall of Johor. Despite the movement of Malay voters, suggestions that PH had won over Malays in general remain premature as sizable numbers voted for BN, and in other states, for PAS. In Johor, the BN stronghold in the east of the state, typically rural areas, was retained by sizable margins of more than 70% of the vote share, such as Pengerang and Kota Tinggi. This contrasts with PH's success in the more developed and urban areas of the west and south. This suggests wholesale rejection of MCA and MIC and enough of a Malay swing to capture the mixed seats.

These results suggest a strong abandonment of all component BN parties. While UMNO's seats were reduced by more than half, of significance is the especially poor performances of MIC, MCA and Gerakan, a performance exacerbated by the mixed voter demographic of Johor which ordinarily would have provided a suitable platform for victory. MIC lost their only seat in Segamat by a majority of more than 5,000; the same seat was won by a margin of 3% in the 2013 elections. MCA meanwhile, saw its support slip even further away, only retaining the seat of Ayer Hitam with a razor thin major of a few hundred votes. BN component parties' performance in Johor indicates that non-Malay voters had rejected the coalition, a trend that had been evident since the elections in 2008. PAS, on the other hand, failed to make any inroads in a state where it has generally struggled to develop a foothold. Contesting in 20 parliamentary seats, PAS was successful in drawing opposition votes away mostly in Parit Sulong, which gave an advantage to UMNO, and to a lesser extent, in Mersing.

UMNO's performance in their traditional stronghold saw the party conceding many seats mostly in the north, west and south of the state. Most of these parliamentary seats were in mixed seats with a Malay majority were won by PKR and Bersatu. UMNO stalwarts suffered heavy defeats, including Shahrir Samad in Johor Bahru and Khaled Nordin in Pasir Gudang. The party managed to retain the east coast however, with wins in Pengerang, Mersing and Kota Tinggi. These are constituencies with a much higher Malay-majority. Bersatu's performance in the election is commendable especially considering the question marks surrounding the ability of the new UMNO-splinter party, winning five of the eight seats contested. Similarly, PKR won seven of their eight seats. DAP continued to build on their foothold in the state, adding one seat to their existing tally, defeating Chua Tee Yong of MCA in Labis.

The biggest difference between the elections in 2013 and 2018 is the composition of parties within PH and the emergence of new Malay parties for the electorate. The split between UMNO and Bersatu saw the latter take two seats from UMNO while PKR took another four seats. Clearly the split in UMNO diluted the Malay vote favourably for PH, the biggest benefactor being PKR. Bersatu did well in semi-urban, mixed constituencies in the West but

fares poorly in the East, suggesting much of their success also came from non-Malay votes. PAS' decision to break their allegiances and go it alone saw them perform exactly the same in 2018 as they did in 2013 – the change being they no longer could ride on the coattails of their coalition partners. It is notable is that Amanah managed to do well in the mixed constituency of Pulai but fared poorly in the more Malay-dominated Parit Sulong indicating that like PAS their popularity in the state is questionable and their victories can only be attributed to non-Malay support.

A lack of observable Malay support for PH, seen in the mixed crowds they drew at both small and large scale *ceramahs* is consistent with suggestions from PH candidates of a 'silent majority' of Malays voting in their favour despite not outwardly showing their support. MCA and MIC's failure to draw non-Malay voters to BN compounds the coalition's reliance on Malay voter for victory, evidenced by their successes in the Malay-majority eastern seats. This reliance cost them as there was a sufficient enough swing of Malay voters in urban and semi-urban areas to turn the tide in PH's favour. BN executed the same election strategy from 2013 without accounting for the various changes to the political dynamic. Similarly to 2008, the selection of candidates for PH ultimately did not matter as voters decided in droves to vote against BN.

The results of the election in Kelantan further cemented the position of PAS in Kelantan. Besides winning more parliamentary and state seats, the party also scored a moral victory against Amanah and PH when both were completely wiped out in Kelantan. While UMNO was not completely decimated in the state, the party lost a further 3 state seats, 2 parliamentary seats and reduced its majority by 5.8%, several UMNO stalwarts such as Mustafa Mohamed continue to secure their seats. The PH did very poorly even in seats which Amanah was supposed to deliver such as Kota Bharu. This was particularly disappointing for Amanah given that the party sought to replace PAS. Perhaps an even more daunting reality for Amanah is the party's wins nationally were due to support from non-Muslim voters. This could be seen in the Kota Bharu contest. The Kota Bharu seat has one of the highest Chinese populace (14.6%) in Kelantan and this was also the seat in which Amanah scored its best performance. This could prove problematic for Amanah in the long run as the party sought to position itself as a moderate Islamist party claiming to represent the Chinese interest. The dismal performance of the Bersatu candidates also shows that the party has little or no traction in Kelantan and the nationwide UMNO split did not impact UMNO in the state significantly. The fight in Kelantan was thus limited to a contest between UMNO and PAS. The small Chinese community's voting pattern mirrored that of the national context with many throwing their support for the PH. This seems to be reflective of an enbloc voting pattern that emerged in 2013 and was further entrenched in 2018.

How The Ground Was Won/Lost

BN's campaign in Johor distinctly lacked a clear narrative from one *ceramah* to the next. The only recurring theme was espousing the success of the local state government, the benefits of continued BN rule in the state, and the lure of stable governance. The virtues of BN Johor can be considered an overarching theme but the application of this messaging was incoherently transmitted and inconsistently applied. The campaign also actively attempted to distance itself from the federal government, eschewing from using Najib's image on campaign material, avoid talking about his leadership and virtues, defending his administration or talking up any merits of his tenure. These two points, of stable Johor government and distancing from the image of the prime minister and his administration, were the only two discernable arguments from a largely confused and incoherent campaign throughout the state. An inability to engage with national issues such as cost of living, influx of foreign workers, or the corruption scandals of 1MDB or FELDA, hamstrung all BN parties especially MIC and MCA. These parties were not able to successfully harness the popularity of the state government, which is largely perceived to be the work of UMNO and the popular Khaled Nordin. As a result, MCA and MIC danced awkwardly around issues that were of direct concern to their voting communities focusing instead on the importance of local politics.

Pakatan Harapan's narrative was clear and consistent throughout the campaign period in Johor, mirroring the messaging at the national level. The themes of '*hapuskan GST*' and overthrowing a scandal-ridden prime minister were repeated steadily, whether at *ceramahs* or on campaign material. 1MDB was mentioned to provide an example of a scandal that has burdened the people with higher cost of living, with the intricacies of the scandal avoided. FELDA scandals and the share price of FELDA Global Ventures however, was a recurring topic that was properly dissected and discussed. These topics were supplemented with campaign promises of reducing foreign workers, addressing housing issues, subsidizing petrol, and abolishing tolls. Clearly, PH were able to address topical issues relevant to voters that BN Johor were unable to due to the fact any discussion of problems is an admission of responsibility. Their messaging was also consistent throughout in stark contrast to the jumbled narrative of BN and was disseminated far and wide particularly through social media.

BN came into the election well-prepared. The redelineation exercises, moving voters around constituencies in Johor, the introduction of the fake news bill, working together with PAS to design three-corner fights, holding a weekday election, a temporary ban on Bersatu, a truncated campaign period, BRIM and other election favours for civil servants, and the weight of the Sultan's backing ably demonstrate BN did not take their preparations, particularly in Johor, lightly. Johor BN leaders saw the flaws in their own

party and their approach, seeking to move away from the patronage politics that defined much of UMNO in the past towards progressive needs-based methods.²⁹ This came too late for BN, with whatever progressive politics that could have been employed vastly overshadowed by Najib and the various problems of his administration. Ultimately, the electorate decided Najib would have to go. Many things worked in favour for PH in the election, although not necessarily of their own doing.

The electorate decided to vote out BN and much of this must be attributed to the unpopularity of Najib Razak as prime minister, as BN enjoyed approval in Johor. The state ably demonstrates the elections as a strong protest vote against the former prime minister, with those closely associated with him such as Nur Jazlan Mohamed and Shahrir Samad suffering heavy defeats. Popular UMNO leader Khaled Nordin suffered, while the lackluster Muhyiddin continued to perform admirably in his home seat. The voting trend for BN has also been in decline in Johor prior to GE14, with popular support falling from 65% in 2008 to 54.9% in 2013.³⁰ Most of the seats conceded by BN were MCA as the non-Malay vote continued to abandon BN. The coalition has also drawn lower levels of support in every parliamentary seat, with the slimmest margins in urban and semi-urban areas. PH could expect to do well in urban areas and those with mixed voter demographics, building on a foundation of strong non-Malay support while BN would have had to draw from central and eastern seats such as Pengerang, Kota Tinggi, and Mersing. Looking at the seats of Johor Bahru, Pasir Gudang and Simpang Renggam, the results demonstrate a swing of Malay voters across urban and semi-urban areas while BN held out in the rural areas, illustrating a deeply divided Malay vote.

In the case of Kelantan, from the onset the BN was facing an uphill task to defeat PAS. Despite the initial excitement about the possibility of a new government coming to power, during the campaign period, it was clear that the BN would find it difficult to dislodge PAS. In fact, the initial thought that a three-way contest will benefit UMNO quickly fizzled with even UMNO and Amanah leaders expecting to lose the elections.³¹ Ultimately, the three-cornered fight favoured PAS in Kelantan. For the BN, Najib was unpopular within the state. Najib was emblematic for an un-Islamic stance due to his corruption scandals. While Tok Pa was deemed to be a more affable figure in Kelantan, he was not deemed to be suitable enough to lead Kelantan. The BN also miscalculated the importance of developmental projects in Kelantan. The promise of developments in the state were deemed by many Kelantanese as a way for BN to bribe the local populace and hit the sensitivities of the Kelantanese populace and their pride in standing independently. The cordial relationship between UMNO leaders and the Kelantanese royal family did not significantly assist or impact the BN's final electoral performance.

For the PH, Dr Mahathir was a liability from the start. He was deemed to be the man who had dealt with Kelantan in the most unjust manner. The PH

was cognizant of this fact and had underplayed the importance of Mahathir in their campaign, focusing instead on the figure of Nik Omar as the central figure of their campaign. This plan did not pan out as planned when the family of Nik Aziz especially his widow came out strongly for PAS and promoted her other son, Nik Abduh as the true successor of Nik Aziz's legacy. PH's campaign was incoherent and could not offer anything substantial to the Kelantanese voters. While BN offered development and PAS the continuance of an Islamic system, PH and Amanah could not offer either to the Kelantanese populace. The PH run in Kelantan was further damaged by the way that the Kelantanese royal family signalled their rejection of PH leaders when the Datukship of two key Amanah leaders were withdrawn. It was thus of little surprise that PH was completely wiped out in Kelantan.

PAS' campaign was clear and cohesive from the beginning. Despite the supposed strong posturing of the BN and UMNO, PAS was still able to muster a strong showing in the state. The party focused its campaign on local issues by depicting its chief minister, Ahmad Yaakob as the man continuing Nik Aziz's legacy which retained the trust of many Kelantanese. At the same time, the party employed themes such as the defence of Islam, the independence of the Kelantanese identity and played on the party's close relationship with the royal family to retain the support of Kelantanese. PAS was also adept in underplaying its close relationship with UMNO nationally and continued attacking the UMNO leadership as un-Islamic. The antagonism displayed against UMNO was strongly articulated during the campaigns. In sum, PAS was able to focus on issues that were strategically employed and thus related well to the electorates.

The cases of Johor and Kelantan ably demonstrate similar election strategies with divergent outcomes for the incumbent. For Kelantan, a local narrative saw PAS retain the state government despite suggestions UMNO stood a chance of winning the state. In Johor, a highly popular BN state government lost comprehensively at parliament and state level despite its attempts to remind Johoreans of all its successes they enjoy. This focus on the local happened with a backdrop of corruption scandals of the federal government and its prime minister Najib, with a former prime minister Mahathir attempting to take advantage of his unpopularity. These factors contribute to a highly interesting electoral contest that witnessed a protest vote against Najib and the BN administration manifest in two ways: with a vote of continuing support for the incumbent PAS government in Kelantan and a withdrawal of support for the incumbent BN government in Johor. The importance of local politics in this instance is underscored by developments at the federal level, with the caveat that circumstances surrounding the government in the leadup to GE14 were exceptional, so much so a focus on local issues failed to be effective.

Endnotes

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5. Hutchinson & Nair, "The Johor Sultanate: Rise or Re-emergence", 2016.
6. "Those who practise hatred and racism have no place in Johor". *The Star Online*, September 17, 2015, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2015/09/17/sultan-ibrahim-get-out-those-who-practise-hatred-and-racism-have-no-place-in-johor/> [6 September 2018].
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8. Guan, "Johor Survey 2017: Views on Identity, Education and the Johor Royal Family", 2017.
9. A printed copy of the manifesto was obtained by the author during the campaigning period. The 52-page booklet extensively covers issues from a very Johorean angle.
10. Interview with Shahrill bin Sabarudin, senior manager with Digital Johor, a consulting firm fully owned by the Johor state government.
11. Salleh, Opposition parties say they will contest under PKR logo, 2018.
12. Hamid, Bangsa Johor concept now more relevant than ever, says Johor ruler, 2016.
13. Based on interview with Amanah supporter in Kota Bharu area on 29th April 2018.
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15. Interview with Khalid Samad, PH-AMANAH candidate for P.108 Shah Alam, April 2018, Shah Alam.
16. Interview with Nik Abduh Nik Aziz, PAS candidate for P.025 Bachok, April 2018, Kota Bharu.
17. Haron, Dataran Tok Pa: Tolonglah, Kelantan...2018.
18. Significant investment in Jason Teoh's campaign material was dedicated to this point, while his campaign trail regularly demonized

- the incumbent Lim Kit Siang as a parachute candidate who cares nothing for the people of his constituency.
19. Chew, Johor-born Syed Saddiq – an emerging voice for Malaysian mellenials?, 2018.
 20. Interview with Kelantanese in Kota Bharu, 20 April 2018.
 21. “TMJ shares his views on political situation in the country”, *The Star Online*, April 8 2018 available at: <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/04/08/tmj-shares-views-on-political-situation-in-the-country/>.
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 24. “TMJ responds to Facebook comments”, *The Star Online*, 8 Apr, 2018, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/04/08/tmj-responds-to-internet-comments/> [6 September 2018].
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