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By Election in Malaysia: A Study of Voting Trends in Kedah

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Abstract: The Bukit Selambau by-election was due to the previous ADUN's of Bukit Selambau, YB.V Arumugam's resignation and this had caused SPR to supervise another by-election on the 7th of April 2009. Even during the naming of the candidates, the local population had shown the tendency to support the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) rather than side with the Barisan Nasional (BN). Along the campaigning period that started on the 29th of March until the 6th of April 2009, numerous strategies and issues (national and local) were played by all of the contesting candidates; however the general population was more interested in the series of speeches held by the PR openly. The findings on the observations and interviews that were done concluded that the candidates' ethnicity, religion, and age played an important role in the Bukit Selambau by-election. As a result, the PR had won even though its candidate S. Manikumar was not well known and BN's candidate BN Datuk S. Ganesan who was very popular, lost the by-election. BN needs to remember that after the political tsunami that hit a year ago, popular candidates do not guarantee victory to the contesting parties even though there were 50.2 % Malay voters in Bukit Selambau. BN's failure to take back Bukit Selambau should be taken as a lesson to be learned, in which a more 'people friendly' campaign should be done later on. In future, the Malays should stay together so that the political tsunami of PRU 12 will not take place in the upcoming PRU 13. BN should down to earth in having back the public trust.

Key words: Election; By-Election; Bukit Selambau, Voter's; Trend, Surveys

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1. INTRODUCTION

Bukit Selambau was near to Sungai Petani. It was a normal area, with wide open spaces, and agricultural landmarks such as small farms owned by local residents. The composition of races was balanced; not one race was more dominant than others. However, to those living in the area or near it, Bukit Selambau was always referred to as an Indian territory. The number of registered voters for the N.25 Bukit Selambau by-election, information on the voting place as well as channels, statistics of the registered voters of N.25 Bukit Selambau and the percentage of races (as depicted on the 18th of February 2009) can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: The Number of Registered Voters for the N.25 Bukit Selambau By-Election (As Depicted on the 18th of February 2009)

Categories	Total
Civilian Voters	35125
Absent Voters	10
• Police	-
• Army	5
• Overseas Voters	
Total Of Registered Voters	35140

Source: Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya, 2009

A total of 15 candidates contested in N.25 Bukit Selambau's by-election and this included women. From the 15 candidates, 13 were independent candidates (Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya, 2009). A total of 874 security officers were reported to be placed in various places on the day of the naming of the candidates of *Dewan Undangan Negeri* (DUN) Bukit Selambau at *Sekolah Menengah Teknik Satu*, Sungai Petani. Based on the observation that was done at the naming of candidates center, it was estimated that there were 12,000 supporters of the PR that were made of supporters from PAS, KEADILAN and DAP that were vehemently supporting their candidate S. Manikumar, and this overcame Barisan Nasional's (BN) supporters that were made of around 5000 people. This scenario had indirectly shown that the results of the by-election later on may not change at all, in which it may be in the PR's favor as it was in the previous PRU12. Judging from the situation here at Bukit Selambau, the people were still in the political tsunami even though one year had passed.

The scenario and behavior of the PR's supporter were more extreme and fanatical than those from BN as they had heated up the setting by playing musical instruments such as *gendang tabla* by the Indians and the Lion Dance by the Chinese supporters from all over the country. The researchers had the chance to interview a representative from the KEADILAN, Encik Samy from Bera, Pahang who was very confident that PR would win again in the Bukit Selambau's by-election. According to him, BN was no longer relevant as they were involved with national issues such as bribery and ISA detainees. Moreover, according to him, the Indian and Chinese do accept that the concept of *ketuanan Melayu* but not with the BN's unfair treatment towards all races.

Supporters from PR, BN, and independent candidates had filled the streets as early from 6.00am. Some had brought signs, slogans, mottos, and there were some who wore masks of Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and other leaders that they supported. The presence of a helicopter itself had attracted a lot of attention. Based on what the researchers had seen, the younger generation was more supportive of the PR in which they had the tendency to be more aggressive than BN's supporters.

N.25 Bukit Selambau's by-election had made its mark in the nation's political history with 15 candidates contesting. The question was who had the potential to win? Judging from the determining factor as well as the silent majority, a vocal local Indian candidate was chosen by People's Coalition (PR), Barisan Nasional (BN) as well as some of the independent parties as their strategy even though the percentage of Indians were 29.5%. Even though the

Malays made more than 50.2 % of the registered voters in Bukit Selambau, their votes were distributed among the three main parties which were PAS, KEADILAN and UMNO. The number of Malay votes was not the deciding factor to a candidate. There was not much to be hoped by BN in Bukit Selambau as long as the Malays were still divided in the by-election (Harian Metro, 2009).

2. WHY DO THE PEOPLE OF BUKIT SELAMBAU VOTE?

Aside from interview sessions in areas of Bukit Selambau, the observations had also yielded an answer to why do the people vote. After following a series of speeches and interviewing the local population, a number of conclusions were to the question of why do they vote? Firstly, the issue of the **candidates and leaders** who were charismatic had shown that the voters were more inclined to support the candidate and leader and not the party as the basis of their voting. Before PRU 12, the trend of choosing parties was more prominent as it can influence the voters to select them, regardless of the candidates. This was because easily accessibly medias such as blogs were not readily available back then. However, after the political tsunami that took place a year ago, based on the voters' trend in other places such as Kuala Terengganu and Ijok, it was apparent that the candidates were the stronger factor in helping the voters to make their choice. This scenario had basically presented to us the reality; that in every by-election or general election, there would be rivalries between BN and PR. Regardless of the candidate, the BN's and PR's leadership had an influence on the voters' decision. This was evident in the series of speeches that were delivered by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, in which it were hugely received by the common public. Even though KEADILAN's candidate, S. Manikumar was not popular and had no experience in politics, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's popularity successfully covered him up.

Based on the researchers' observation on the series of speeches that were delivered by him at Taman Peruda, Taman Kelisa Ria, Taman Desa Aman dan Taman Ria Jaya, the researchers had agreed with the general opinion that the political party's leaders had a huge impact to the candidates in the election. Even though the issues that were discussed by him was outdated such as bribery, ISA detainees human rights, death of S Kugan while in police custody, and Altantuya, the audience were supportive and excited enough to stay tuned even in the rain. This signals that the people liked to listen to campaigning speeches by their supported leaders. BN, on the other hand, decided to make house visits, in which it was clear that it was not enough to capture the peoples' attention.

A few of the registered voters in Taman Desa Aman dan Taman Ria Jaya that were visited by BN's candidate, Datuk S. Ganesan had expressed their opinions that house visits were no longer effective in winning the peoples' heart, as it was mostly focused on a certain groups of people. They preferred to listen to BN candidate's speeches as it was more effective, such as what was done by the PR. On a side note, all 13 independent candidates themselves had employed variable strategies; independent candidate Husaini Yaacob whose symbol was a bus, had transported his supporters from one place to another by using a blue bus. Independent candidate L. Sarala who had a bicycle as a symbol, had cycled from places along Taman Ria Jaya, Taman Ria Utara and Taman Ria Selatan in order to win votes.

Other countries in this world had recently experienced the same channel (candidates and leaders) clearly, for example Latin America and Thailand had noticed that the candidates were influential on the general populations' voting trend. This phenomenon may be regarded as having its roots in this country due to certain cases such as Datuk Seri Wan Azizah's in Permatang Pauh. The sentiment of sympathy and feminism were said to be the main factors in the peoples' vote. Nevertheless, there were exemption to the rule in which there were times that the voters were more concerned with who was the candidate at certain places without showing a clear sentiment why they had done that, in which it could be due to personal judgment.

District Factor was one of the factors that influenced the voters' decision in making any decision in Bukit Selambau's by-election 2009. In France, there was a saying, "*electoral geography*" in which it explained that the voters' behaviour were related to the local sentiment. The French were more prone to vote based on the local interest as well as the country's unlike the Brits and Americans. In the United States of America, since the Republican Party was responsible to the abolishment of slavery, the South American were more likely to vote for the Democrat (for example, President Carter in the 1976 election) (mystar online, 2009). In Britain, liberism was heavily practiced in Wales and West England. Among the criterias that were considered important in the selection of candidates in Bukit Selambau was the factor of candidate's locality. Both of the contesting parties which were BN and PR had chosen locals and they were Datuk S. Ganesan from BN and S. Manikumar from PR.

BN's candidate, Datuk S. Ganesan was highly experienced in politics in which was the Chairperson of MIC Kedah, and was the peoples' representative in Lunas whereas S. Manikumar who had no experience as all in politics, was PR's candidate. A number of political observers had concluded that PR was taking a huge risk by nominating a candidate that had no background in politics and was not popular at all. Nevertheless, that factor cannot be taken as a sign that PR would lose as the previous ADUN of Bukit Selambau, V. Arumugan, had contested on independent ticket and won. This shows that even though he had no political experience and was not known by the general population, he had won because he was a local. Another factor that had contributed to his win was indecisive voters who did not want to vote for neither BN nor PR that they chose to vote for independent candidates. Thus, it can be said that V. Arumugan's previous success was the inspiration that propelled others, namely 13 independent candidates, to try their luck in the by-election. In politics, anything can happen if the people were a significant political scale in deciding the result. Why did this happen? The sentiment of locality was a huge factor in which there were no substituting it, complemented with rejection towards BN and PR.

Table 2: Information on the Voting Areas / Voting Centers and Channels

Kategori	Jumlah
• Voting Districts	22
• Voting Centers	22
• Voting Channels	64

Source: Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya, 2009

Religion Factor was also one of the main factors that influenced the voters' voting trend in Bukit Selambau that had a composition of races such as the Malays, Indians, and the Chinese. Based on the interviews that were held earlier, it was found out that in general, the BN's and PR's supporters were mostly interested in discussing national issues. The PR's supporters were more prone to discuss on the topic of bribery among the top brass, PPSMI, ISA detainees, HINDRAF, Altantuya, S.Kugan's death, and fascination towards PAS's concept of Islam. On another note, BN's supporters were more likely to discuss topics such as *ketuanan Melayu*, Datuk Seri Nizar's treason towards the Sultan of Perak, PPSMI and others; that decorated each and everyone's campaign and strategies.

In the United States of America and Britain, there were no parties that were based on religion. However, in the United States of America, in general the Catholics and Jewish were more supportive of the Democrats, whereas those whose religion were unidentified, they had the tendency to support parties that had some connection to religion and beliefs. In Britain, the Catholics were mostly supportive of the Labor Party. This phenomenon may be connection to the separation and judgment of classes and others. In Malaysia and Indonesia, religion was an important factor, especially when complemented with political power and individual responsibilities in helping their religious idols.

However, recently a new trend had emerged in terms of the voters' behavior as well as the politicians. Religion was no longer the main agenda to be considered when one was making any political decisions, or even when involved in political events such as election days. It was no longer peculiar to see supporters of religion based parties such as PAS to be involved in activities that were sponsored by other parties, even though they differ in their religious views. There were also instances in which they had voted candidates that had a different religion than theirs, for the sake of winning the election. This phenomenon had only come into sight in recent years. Before the formation of PR that were made of PAS, KEADILAN and DAP, there were no political channels that connected PAS and DAP as they had different views and principles in which the PAS carried the concept of an Islamic nation whereas DAP did not.

In the Bukit Selambau by-election, the voting trend was also influenced by **ethnicity factor** in which one's ethnicity and background of the candidates was considered to be important. For instance, in the USA, the immigrants and the minorities were mostly supportive of the Democrats. In Britain, the blacks were known to be supportive of the Labor Party. In Malaysia, ethnic division was seen as being more important than religion, class and others. Several mainstream parties clearly had a majority in their judgment of an ethnic's and race's power. However, the formation of new parties that were heavily promoted such as PKR had added extra value to the political situation of the country. Bukit Selambau itself was an example of how this issue was made as one of the strategy to win the by-election.

Based on the researcher's observation on the series of speeches by PR as well as visits to MIC's command center in Taman Tunku Hamimah, ethnicity may play a significant role in the voting trend of this by-election. An interview with Datuk G. Palanivel at BN's (MIC) command center confirmed that ethnicity was one of the main factor in winning and BN can win Bukit Selambau again if they play their cards right. According to him, BN's candidate

Datuk S. Ganesan's who were experienced in politics as well as a local from a middle class family may just be the winning factor that may lead to BN's victory. The BN's candidate had also helped the locals as he was also a lawyer, in which this fact helped to boost the people's confidence towards him.

Voter's Age was also one of the trend that was observed in Bukit Selambau's by-election in which the younger generation or channel 3, 4, 5 were more supportive of the PR. The PKR's concept of multiracialism and extremely devoted towards the KEADILAN's advisor had attracted them to the PR. Based on the researcher's observation, after the candidates' nomination on the 29th of March 2009 until the voting day on the 7th of April 2009, the younger generation who supported PR were highly spirited in which they carried PR's flag while driving and riding motorcycles, whereas those who did a similar thing for BN were significantly less.

This showed that the voters were now taking part in political activities; however this did not mean that the voters would themselves vote, as sometimes they had done their deed in order to attract the attention of the locals, or even for a small fee paid by certain individuals. However, these people do convey their critical opinions through blogs. If there younger generation were ready to queue at voting centers later on, the results of the election would be more easier to interpret as these people were intelligent and matured enough to make the decision of who would later lead the country for their own good.

Table 3: Statistics of the Registered Voters N.25 Bukit Selambau (As Depicted on the 18th of February 2009)

VOTING DISTRICTS	CODE NO.	VOTERS		
		NORMAL	POST	TOTAL
Kuala Sin	014/25/01	831	-	831
Kampung Sungkap	014/25/02	600	-	600
Bukit Lembu	014/25/03	1223	-	1223
Taman Bandar Baru	014/25/04	4179	1	4180
Sungai Lalang	014/25/05	1986	1	1987
Taman Desa Aman	014/25/06	2514	-	2514
Bandar Laguna Merbok	014/25/07	671	1	672
Tasek Apong	014/25/08	1363	1	1364
Ayer Menideh	014/25/09	1695	-	1695
Jalan Badlishah	014/25/10	796	1	797
Taman Paruda	014/25/11	1936	-	1936
Taman Ria Utara	014/25/12	2244	-	2244
Taman Tia Jaya	014/25/13	5122	-	5122
United Petani	014/25/14	973	-	973
Petani Para	014/25/15	359	-	359
Bukit Rusa	014/25/16	667	-	667
Pekan Bukit Selambau	014/25/17	1986	10-	1996
Kampong Pokok Machang	014/25/18	696	-	696
Batu Belachan	014/25/19	785	-	785
Titi Panjang	014/25/20	1058	-	1058
Ambangan Height	014/25/21	647	-	647
Taman Ria Selatan	014/25/22	2494	-	2494
TOTAL		35125	15	35140

Source: Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya , 2009

Table 4: PERCENTAGES OF RACES IN N.25 BUKIT SELAMBAU

Race	Percentage (%)
Malays	50.2
Indians	29.5
Chinese	19.3
Others	1
Total	100

Source: Harian Metro, 8 April 2009

3. RESULTS OF BUKIT SELAMBAU'S BY-ELECTION

In this by-election, KEADILAN had retaken the position of the DUN of Bukit Selambau when its candidate S. Manikumar won the by-election with a majority of 2403, beating BN's candidate, Datuk S. Ganesan. The percentage of registered voters that went to vote was 70 percent compared to 73.7 percent on the previous general election. According to SPR, there were three factors that contributed to the lesser number of voters.

The first factor was that the voting day was set on Tuesday in which it was a working day, and this caused outstation voters' inability to return back to their hometown to vote. This was meant to happen when SPR set the voting day on working days. Next, the final timeframe for voting which was from four to five in the evening had limited the chance of voters who were unable to come in the morning, whereas those who were not committed changed their mind to not vote in the very last minute. Aside from that, the factor of voting pleaders who had congregated outside of the voting centers may have scared the voters off, due to the traffic congestions as well as the tense situation (mstar online, 2009).

4. CONCLUSION

If we were to reflect back to the voting trend in the N.25 Bukit Selambau's by-election in terms of socialization, candidates and leaders, district, religion, ethnicity and age of the voters, it was clear that even from the day of the naming of the candidate, the scenario was more positive towards the PR than BN. Even though the BN tried to strengthen their position at the very last minute by releasing 13 ISA detainees, it was not enough to attract the votes from the Malays, Indians and Chinese community. Nevertheless, the effort that was made by Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak had at least build confidence among the general population on the new leadership with the transformation.

The Deputy Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said the UMNO would continue to refine the voting trend of all races towards the BN's candidate in order to ensure that victory would be theirs once more (mstar Online, 2009). Moreover, this was also done due to the reason that the Bukit Selambau's by-election had not shown any significant changes in term of the voters' opinion towards BN. Rationally, when a district were occupied by mostly Malays, the formula was that BN would win but this was not true anymore as the majority do not guarantee a win for the BN as the Malays were divided. Moreover, according to him, BN had hoped to win votes from the non Malays but the opposite happened, and this resulted in BN's loss. However, even though we fight for the Malays, we were also just with the other races. Thus, we need to act now before it is too late.

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