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Muhammad Sanusi Md. Nor speaking at the DUN Kubang Rotan 'Sembang Santai' program in Kuala Kedah on 1 August 2023.
(photo: Dr Ahmad Fakhruddin / Facebook)

Populism, Pietism and Pragmatism in the Kedah State Election

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Whether the unlikely partnership of Pakatan Harapan and Barisan Nasional can wrest Kedah from Perikatan Nasional would require an extraordinary alignment of the stars.

Kedah is a state of two halves. Its southern part is urbanised, with a strong industrial base and mixed population, while its northern and eastern parts are primarily agricultural, rural, and mono-ethnic. The state was swept up by the so-called “green wave” in the 2022 general elections, resulting in Perikatan Nasional (PN) winning 14 out of 15 parliamentary seats. In the 2022 general elections (GE15), Barisan Nasional (BN) was decimated in most Malay-majority areas especially in Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu. Many of its erstwhile supporters voted for PN, along with overwhelming support from new and young Malay voters, which propelled PN to become the second strongest coalition in the country.

Since 2008, the Kedah state government has changed hands several times between Pakatan Rakyat (PH’s predecessor), BN, Pakatan Harapan (PH), and PN. The opening up of Malaysia’s democratic space and fragmentation of the Malay electorate have made the state of Kedah more electorally competitive. This was evident in the 2018 election, when PH was tied with PAS-BN alliance with 18 seats each in the state’s 36-member assembly. The then PH-led state government, built upon a rickety foundation, collapsed in 2020 when Bersatu left the coalition to join PAS and UMNO as part of the Muafakat Nasional (National Concord) coalition.

In the 2023 state election, we see a different dynamic at play. In a previously inconceivable scenario, UMNO is presently in alliance with PH, making it a one-on-one competition between PH-BN and PN in most state seats: only eight out of 36 seats see multi-cornered contests. The PH-BN seat allocations are as follows: UMNO (15 seats); People’s Justice Party, PKR (10 seats); Amanah (9 seats); and Democratic Action Party, DAP (2 seats). [19 incumbents](#) are defending their seats (14 from PN and 5 from PH-BN).

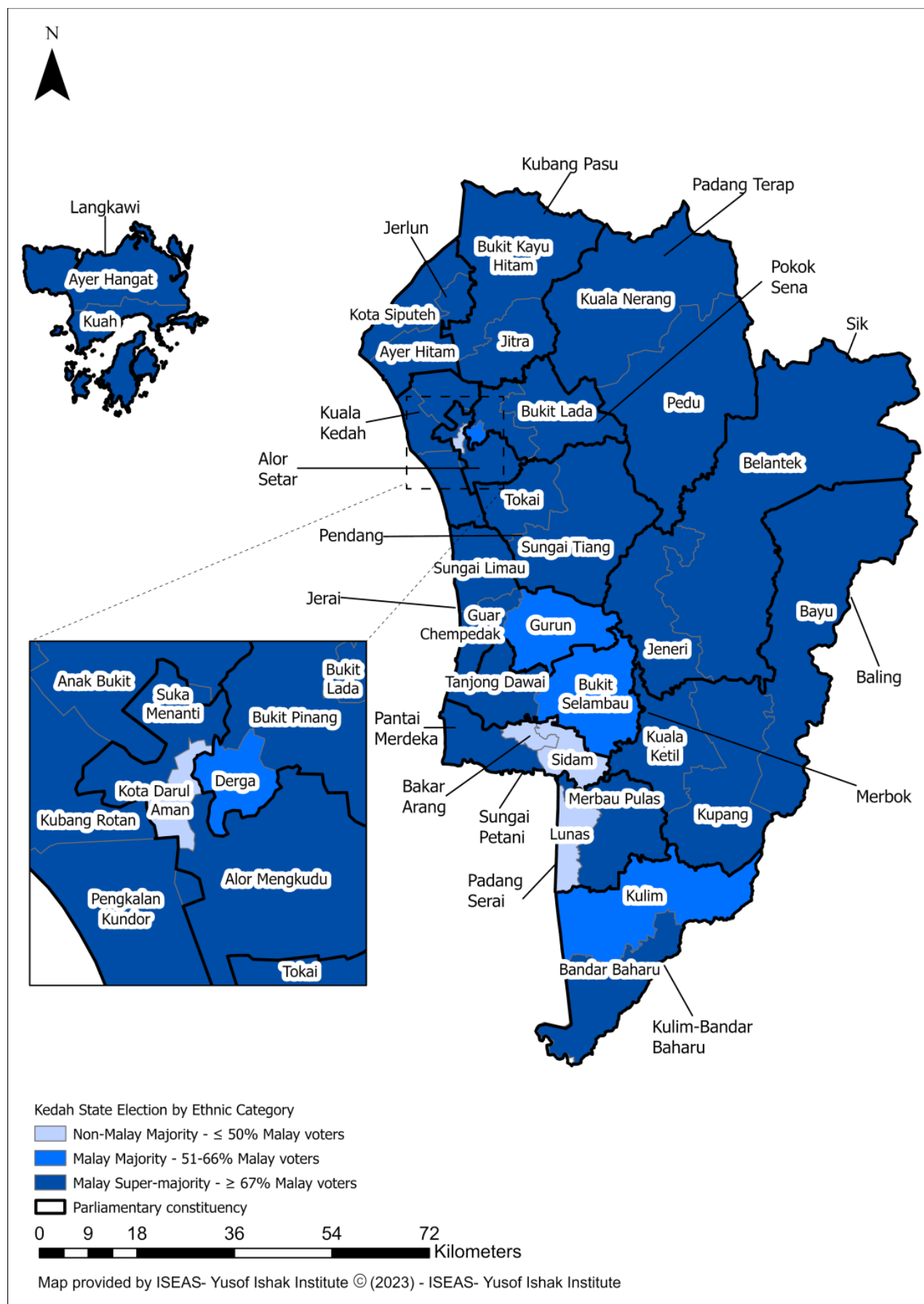
A few weeks before nomination day, Mahfuz Omar, the PH chairperson in Kedah and former MP for Pokok Sena, [boldly predicted](#) that the combination of PH and BN will prevail with a simple majority in the state election. His calculation is simple: PH-BN coalition has a combined total of 16 seats and needs only three additional seats to gain a majority in the 36-seat state legislature. Is it a realistic forecast grounded in numbers and current voter sentiment?

Now that BN is joining forces with PH, what will it look like at the state constituency level? More importantly, does PH-BN stand a fighting chance against PN’s electoral dominance in Kedah? In the 2018 GE, PH-BN had combined votes of more than 50 per cent (after excluding Bersatu, which was part of PH then) in 18 out of 36 state seats. These comprised ten seats in constituencies with a Malay super-majority population (more than 70 per cent), four seats in Malay-majority areas but with sizeable non-Malay populations (more than 35 per cent Malay), and four seats with non-Malay majority populations. Since it will be a straight one-to-one contest between PH-BN and PN tomorrow, these 18 seats are considered competitive in a state where PN’s dominance

seems to be the order of the day.

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Figure 1. Kedah state seats by ethnic composition



Map credit: Ms. Rebecca Neo, Research Officer, ISEAS

Further breaking down the PH-BN vote share in the 2018 GE, in eight Malay-majority state seats it had a combined vote-share of more than 60 per cent, which provides PH-BN with a potential cushion (and would take into account low vote transferability from BN to PH, plus votes shifting from BN to PN).

Figure 2. Kedah: State seats where PH-BN had combined votes of over 60 per cent, 2018 general election

Seats	Malay population (as % of total)	PH-BN vote-share in 2018 (%)
Suka Menanti	74	81.6
Alor Mengkudu	77	68.7
Kubang Rotan	72	74.6
Pengkalan Kundor	76	66.6
Gurun	59	76.1
Bukit Selambau	59	69.4
Merbau Pulas	75	65.4
Kulim	62	71.0

Source: Author's compilation

One big state personality that looms large over the election is the current Chief Minister Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor. Sanusi, [a Trump-like populist figure](#), who has been hogging recent news headlines, primarily for making deeply offensive comments about non-Malays. The cruder and callous Sanusi's public statements, the more popular he becomes with his staunch supporters. However, Sanusi is currently facing [two sedition charges](#) for his remarks against the royalty, [a defamation lawsuit](#) launched by tycoon Vincent Tan, and [an investigation](#) of Sanusi's role in the alleged theft of Rare Earth Elements (REE) from the Bukit Enggang Forest Reserve.

On the PH-BN side, there is no similarly influential figure to energise its base, which likely prompted [Anwar Ibrahim to swoop in](#) to stem Sanusi's populist tide. Whether the "Sanusi factor" buoys PN into a decisive victory or handicaps PN's appeal to fence-

sitters would make for an interesting post-election analysis.

This election also features a couple of Kedah's popular sports personalities, both PN candidates. First is former state and national football player Baddrol Bakhtiar, contesting in Gurun, a state seat long held by BN but wrested by PH in 2018. The Gurun state seat is part of the Jerai parliamentary seat, which PN won by 33,192 votes in GE15. Baddrol, [a political novice](#), is up against Firdaus Johari, [son of PKR incumbent](#) Johari Abdul and brother of the current MP of Sungai Petani, Taufik Johari, making Gurun one of the contests to watch.

Another exciting match-up is in the Alor Mengkudu state seat, where the PN candidate is also a former state and national football player, Radhi Mat Din, who is facing Mahfuz Omar, former MP for Pokok Sena and PH chairperson in Kedah. Unlike Baddrol, Radhi is a seasoned candidate who challenged Mahfuz in the Pokok Sena parliamentary seat in 2018 and lost by 5,558 votes. The Alor Mengkudu contest thus pits two big state personalities in a Malay-majority seat, which reflects the broader state-wide trend of voters switching between BN, PAS, and PH over the years.

When it comes to manifestos, there is a significant overlap between PH-BN and PN. Both blocs' manifestos focus on economic development, namely, attracting foreign investments and paying attention to social welfare of the less privileged, a clean water supply, a more efficient public service, and the sustainable management of natural resources. [PN's manifesto](#) has 17 specific promises for various groups while [PH-BN's](#) offers various programmes and improvements under four broad themes. One glaring difference is the inclusion of the morality dimension in PN's manifesto, which promises to carry out the Islamic injunction of "*amar makruf, nahi mungkar*" (enjoining good and forbidding evil).

Despite PH-BN's competitiveness at the state level, it remains a tall order for it to defeat the PN juggernaut in Kedah. Even if PH-BN wins the 18 competitive seats mentioned above, it is still not enough to form a simple majority. For that to happen, PH-BN needs high voter turnout, especially among disillusioned PH supporters, *plus* high vote transferability from BN to PH-BN, and a low voter defection rate from BN to PN. In addition to [inviting foreign investments](#), to benefit industrialised southern Kedah, it would also need to take care of the welfare of the state's rural areas; Kedah [produces 43 per cent of Malaysia's rice](#). Whether PH-BN achieves success in Kedah would depend on whether it can convince the state's voters, for whom bread-and-butter issues are paramount, that it can deliver on the economic front, as promised in its manifesto.

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