

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ROLE OF CURRENT ISSUES/MEDIA AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP/CANDIDATES WITH YOUTH PERCEPTION TOWARDS BARISAN NASIONAL IN BATU PAHAT PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY. CASE STUDY: THE 14TH GENERAL ELECTION

¹*Fauziah Binti Ani, ²Nur Wasila Binti Siam

ABSTRACT--The defeat of Barisan Nasional (BN) during the 14th General Elections (GE-14) at the majority of youth voting streams shows youth rejection of BN at the Batu Pahat parliamentary constituency, even though the party introduced out many programmes and assistance for these groups before GE-14. Youth perception, which mainly led to this decision, was influenced by a multitude of factors, among them were media influence and BN local leadership in the area. This paper studies the relationship between the role of media and local leadership, with youth perception towards BN at the Batu Pahat parliamentary constituency. 396 voters under 40 years old were selected as respondents, using a random sampling method. The data is collected through questionnaires, and analysed with the Pearson Correlation Product Moment (Correlation) supported by the SPSS software. The findings show that the role of new media as well as the failure of the local BN leadership were factors with significant relationship with youth perception of BN. This study suggests to the BN party to portray an image that is cleaner and with more integrity, and put forward younger candidates able to voice out youth voices to a more prominent stage. Both the UMNO and Barisan Nasional party machinery must also show wisdom in addressing national issues and issues close to the people, namely leadership image and economic concerns.

KEY WORDS-- General Election, Local Leadership, Parliamentary Constituency, Political Party

I. INTRODUCTION

The 14th General Election (GE-14) in May 2018 witnessed the *Barisan Nasional* party (BN) losing to the *Pakatan Harapan* party (PH), winning only 79 parliamentary seats, compared to 133 seats in the previous General Election (GE-13) in 2013. This meant the BN, who held the reins of government for the past 60 years, lost to PH, and a number of states were also won by PH, including the state of Johor. In Johor, the parliamentary seats held

¹ *Department of Social Science, Centre of General Studies and Co-Curricular/ Universiti Tun Huseein Onn Malaysia (UTHM), Batu Pahat, Johor, fauziaha@uthm.edu.my

² Faculty of Applied Science and Technology, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM), Batu Pahat, Johor.

by BN shrunk to merely eight seats, compared to 21 seats in the previous general election. In the Batu Pahat parliamentary constituency, BN also lost to PH, the latter retaining the seat with a larger majority. In GE-13, PH won with a majority of 1,524 votes, while in the latest GE-14, PH won a majority of 17,894 votes.

Voter support is closely related to perception. Perception, according to Kotler, means the process an individual makes in selecting, arranging, and interpreting information input to produce a meaningful overall picture, then translated into choice (Kotler;2000). The main research subject in measuring perception are human beings and their interaction with the voting process, which also includes the election results (Amer Saifude; 2009).

Perception is highly subjective, and its effects significant if not properly addressed. This perception is shaped by surrounding elements, such as social environment influences that include leadership, direction of the party, current issues, and political participation (Samsi, 2014). This explains how perception is readily influenced by surrounding factors, including the role of the media and current issues, as well as local leadership approach towards youths, which have an impact on youth choice of the government of the day.

Previous studies proved the existence of a significant relationship between the influence of current issues, media, and candidate selection and voter perception towards the ruling government. A study by Baharuddin Aziz *et al.* (2008) on the role of the media during the 2008 General Elections show that 55 per cent of voters found issues in the media influence their decision in voting their candidates/parties. Their study found that the internet and web blogs emerged as an alternative medium of disseminating information, compared to the mainstream media.

Local candidate and leadership factors also affect youth perception towards the contesting parties. A study conducted during the State Elections (DUN) in Sarawak found that youth voters looked towards candidates capable of voicing their aspirations to the highest level, and prefer a clean candidate and youth-friendly leadership. Respondent feedback show they prefer a candidate willing to listen to their views, and are sincere in helping the people with their complaints and problems. They also support any party that fights for humanitarian issues and able to fulfil promises (Junaidi Awang Besar, 2012).

Therefore, BN's defeat in GE-14 raises the question, why did this scenario, known as the 'people's tsunami' happen? This was because pre-GE-14 studies found that BN was still accepted and deemed relevant as the government of the day. 300 respondents, from multi-ethnic backgrounds, participated in a study on youth perception towards policies implemented by Dato Seri Najib Tun Razak in the Klang Valley area. The findings show the majority of youths (52 per cent) have a positive perception of the policies implemented by Dato Seri Najib and the BN Government as, according to respondents, BN provided more help in education, employment, and is competent in managing the national economy. However, there remains a negative perception towards Dato Seri Najib's leadership, viewed as weak in combating corruption and in controlling the price of market goods (Syahirah, 2012).

In other research developments, there was also a study on the political perception of Malay youths post-2008 General Elections. This study, involving 3,484 respondents across Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah, found that 63.6 per cent of respondents chose BN for the parliamentary level, and 55.2 per cent chose BN for the State Assembly (DUN) level. According to the same study, 81.6 per cent of respondents state their support, as youths, to support the BN government programmes and thus help with the national development agenda (Othman, 2016).

However, the results of the preceding studies, including youth participation in *Barisan Nasional* programmes were not wholly accurate in accessing youth support for the hitherto ruling party. In reality, the youth section has demonstrated significant rejection of BN in the GE-14. This rejection was influenced by youth perception towards *Barisan Nasional*, and the party's loss of the youth voting streams in Batu Pahat. Therefore, this study aims to explore the relationship between the role of the media and local leadership, with youth perception towards *Barisan Nasional*, which led to the party's defeat at the Batu Pahat parliamentary constituency.

1.1 Background of Research Area



Map of the Voting Districts and DUN (State Assembly seats) in Batu Pahat parliamentary constituency.

Source: Special Affairs Department (JASA) Johor.

This study is conducted in the Batu Pahat parliamentary constituency, which contains three DUN seats and 44 district polling centres (PDM). The Batu Pahat parliamentary seat has an overall of 98,543 voters, with three DUN seats: Penggaram (49,750 voters), Senggarang (27,587 voters), and Rengit (21,206 voters). According to the electoral data up to ST4/2017, from the 97,991 registered voters in Batu Pahat parliamentary constituency, 39,934 voters (40 per cent) are youths below the age of 40. In the GE-13 in 2013, the *Barisan Nasional* candidate from the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party lost to the *Pakatan Harapan* candidate from the *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR), with a majority of 1,732 votes. However, in the latest 2018 General Elections in May 2018, the *Barisan Nasional* candidate again lost the PKR candidate, with a significantly higher majority of 17,894 votes (Suruhanjaya Pilihanraya Malaysia, 2018)

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The survey method uses quantitative data, collected through questionnaires. The statistical results condenses the studied population characteristics. In this study, the independent variables (IV) are influence of issues in social

media and the influence of local candidates and leadership. Meanwhile, the dependent variable (DV) is youth perception towards the *Barisan Nasional*.

Aside from surveys, this study is also supported by more subjective interview techniques, which completes the answer to the research question. There are three sections in the questionnaires: Section A, on respondent background and demographic, consisting of age, ethnicity, occupation, and education level. Section B contains ten questions on the role of national-level current issues and the role of the media in their choice of political party. Section C contains ten questions on respondent reception to BN electoral candidates and leadership in their area. The item-total participation level consists of 25 measured questions, using the five-point Likert scale for Sections B and C.

III. RESEARCH FINDINGS

There are two objectives in this study. Firstly, to determine the demographic background of respondents that participated in this study through a cross-tab analysis. Secondly, to determine a significant relationship between the factors of the role of current issues and influence and local leadership/candidates with youth perception towards BN in Batu Pahat, by utilising the moderate correlation analysis. The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software is used to answer the two objectives.

3.1 Determining the Demographic Background of Youth Voters

Malays and students form the majority of survey respondents, with 60 per cent of the total respondents being young females. 206 respondents (52 per cent) are within the 21-30 years age range. The remaining 190 respondents (48 per cent) are between 31-40 years of age. 223 respondents (56.3 per cent) are students or college undergraduates. 105 respondents (26.5 per cent) are employed in the private sector, while 58 respondents (14.6 per cent) are government staff. Of the 396 respondents, only 10 respondents (2.5 per cent) are self-employed.

3.2 Studying the Significant Relationship between the role of media / current issues factor and influence of area leadership/candidate with youth perception towards the BN party in Batu Pahat Parliamentary constituency

Table 1: Correlation between Leadership/Candidate Factor and Influence or Issues/Media with Youth Perception

		Influence of Local Leadership/Candidate	Influence of Current Issues/Media	Youth Perception
Influence of Local Leadership/Candidate	Pearson Correlation	1	.788**	.796*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002	.002
	N	396	396	396

Influence of Current Issues/Media	Pearson Correlation	.788**	1	-.908**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002		.000
	N	396	396	396
Youth Perception	Pearson Correlation	.796**	-.908**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.000	
	N	396	396	396

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The findings of correlation analysis, as shown in Table 1 shows a strong and significant relationship @ between influence of local leadership/candidate ($r=.796$, $p<0.5$) with youth perception towards *Barisan Nasional*. This same relationship is also obtained from previous studies, conducted on the relationship between the candidate factor and voter perception, with a large number of voters in Sarawak taking into consideration candidate integrity and leadership as the basis of their decision-making (Faisal, 2004).

Referring to the correlation schedule, there is a negative, strong, and significant relationship between the Influence of Current Issues/Media with Youth Perception ($r=-.908$ $p<0.5$). This means the current issues/media factor strongly influences youth perception in their decision-making while voting. The higher the media access among electors, the lower their discretion in decision-making. This finding also supports the results of previous studies, which looks into the relationship between access to social media and the behaviour of Voters in the Simultaneous Local Elections in 2018. Among the students of UNTAG, Surabaya, they found a negative, strong, and significant relationship between access to social media and voter behaviour, and concludes that the higher the access to internet and current issues, the lower the voter behaviour (Fitri Norhabiba, 2018)

Overall, the research findings prove a strong and significant relationship between media and current issues factor and leadership and candidates factor with youth perception towards the *Barisan Nasional* in the last GE-14. This is consistent with other studies by Mohd Nizar Sudin et. al (2017), Azmi Abd Malek (2018), and others that conclude these factors do contribute to youth perception, later translated to their choice under the influence of the current issues/new media factor and the leadership/candidate factor, and youths are more inclined to decide based on their perception.

IV. DISCUSSING THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Through this study, it is clear there is a significant relationship between the two factors: media and national issues, as well as local leadership/candidates, which influence youth perception towards the *Barisan Nasional* in the Batu Pahat parliamentary constituency. The Malaysian political landscape, which drastically changed since the 12th General Elections, witnessed multiple factors that contributed to BN's defeat, and the studied factors might only be a small part of the true factors that led to this scenario.

According to previous studies on the topic, the current issues and media factor is very close to the voter, especially youths. This finding do not deny this reality, with respondents turning to alternative media to access information, due to its immediacy and applicability. A study by the *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia* (UKM) support the research findings, which found the younger generation see the internet as second nature and a trustworthy source. Based on current situation, with a deluge of alternative views uploaded to cyberspace, the influence of the internet cannot be understated, especially among those dissatisfied with their situation. Trust in the media-disseminated information is important, as it forms the basis of one's decision-making (S. A. Rahim, 2008)

In the context of Batu Pahat parliamentary constituency, the urban geography factor encourages accessible internet coverage in the area, supported by widespread use of gadgets, and the alternative media served its role throughout the GE-14 campaigning period. Hitherto, posters and buntings were the main choice during the 12th and 13th General Elections. However, the use of Twitter, Instagram, short videos, and other political activity apps, accessible from a smart phone, are prioritised as they are not costly.

The GE-14 also witnessed a perception war, spread through the social media, including very negative story on government policy and leadership. The failure of the political party to control social media translates to defeat in the perception war, thus defeat in the elections. It should be noted that the use of social media in politics have dramatically transform campaigning methods. Who needs conventional media, when information disseminated by social media can reach millions of people in a heartbeat?

In the context of national issue influence, 75.8 per cent of respondents agree that national issues, such as the Goods And Services Tax (GST) and 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), became the main factor that negatively affected youth perception towards BN. These are the most viral issues in new media, and received the bulk of criticism from the people. The GST issue, for instance, are close to the people as this directly involves their income and daily spending. The 1MDB issue involves the integrity and credibility of the former sixth Prime Minister in his management of national assets and money.

Up to 70.5 per cent of respondents agree with the statement that PH was right to manipulate and harp on this issue, or in other words, PH effectively waged a hearts-and-minds campaign in anticipation of the GE-14. This is supported by the following opinion of the respondent, with 77.3 per cent of the respondents agreeing that BN failed to counter the negative issues and perceptions taking root among the local populace. This indirectly shows the party's new media unit was ineffective in effectively championing for populist issues. This is supported by a study by Mohd Fuad Mat Jali *et al* on internet access and its effects on voter political participation in the state of Johor. This study states that internet access and usage evidently influences youth voter support, especially in urban areas, and has a huge impact on the 2008 General Elections, with the previous government (BN) failing to provide a satisfactory explanation (Mohd Fuad et al.,2012)

Local leadership and candidates is the other factor observed as having a relationship with youth perception to the *Barisan Nasional* in the Batu Pahat parliamentary constituency. In other words, the local BN leadership reflects their image to the voters, especially the youths, in making their appraisal and constructing their perception to BN itself. In Batu Pahat, 67.7 per cent of respondents said they were never approached by UMNO and BN, and even the UMNO male and female youth wings were said to be impractical in organising programmes aimed at youths.

In addition, youth voters in Batu Pahat were not averse to vote for non-local candidates. 66.5 per cent of respondents voice their support for an outsider to contest in Batu Pahat, as they prioritise the electoral promises and manifesto of the contesting party in line with youth aspiration. In the last GE-14, PH manifesto was distributed widely in the area, with promises to the youth, including abolishing the National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) loans, building more affordable housing for youths, and providing more employment opportunities for graduates and youths.

The BN candidate issue during the GE-14 was also a factor in youth rejection of the party. 75.3 per cent of respondents admit to being unfamiliar with the contesting candidates. This was because the candidate, who was also the Batu Pahat Wanita UMNO chief, did not organise enough programmes targeting local youths.

Almost 60 per cent of the overall respondents also prefer that younger candidates contest for the Batu Pahat parliamentary seat. This is because youths wish for their concerns to be presented to and understood by the government, and a younger leader might be more sympathetic to their aspirations. This aspect has been tackled in previous studies, with the candidate issue having a significant influence among younger voters. According to a study by UKM, factors influencing voting behaviour include candidate, party, ethnicity, current issues, and money. This study utilises the questionnaire method involving 600 respondents in Permatang Pauh parliamentary constituency, and interviewing respondents selected based on features required by the researchers. The findings show that the candidate factor is still seen as the dominant factor in determining voter direction. This is proven when the same study on the same respondents show an increase in the candidate factor being the influential factor determining their voting behaviour in the next election. Clearly, the candidate factor, one with integrity and ticking all the voter requirement boxes, will be their choice during voting (Marlisa Abdul; Mohd F. Mat Jali Rahim, 2018).

4.1 Further Research Suggestions

To improve the personality of political parties and youths vis-a-vis politics, this study suggests both political parties and youths to exercise prudence in using the media. Laws such as the Fake News Act must be enforced, to prevent the unchecked and unsanctioned dissemination of false stories, which affects the reputation of the ruling party or government, or any associate of said ruling party. In addition, the media and information units of political parties must act more aggressively to address issues and highlight certain issues to win the trust of the voters. This is a part of psychological operations, a skill every party machinery must refine.

To ensure the party aspiration is in line with the will of the youth, and to allow for effective approach of this group, this study also suggests the party leadership to be more open and relaxed in their interaction with the youth. This approach should be taken by every section of the party, from the higher echelons to the grassroots. Electoral candidates should also be introduced much earlier, and visit the area and interact with the youths, so the latter may be more familiar with the candidate, not only during election season.

V. CONCLUSION

In summary, the role of current issues and media, and the influence of local candidate and leadership have a significant relationship with youth voter perception, which led the youths to choose PH as their representative in the Batu Pahat parliamentary seat. The youths do not reject earlier BN concepts and policies as the ruling party,

and have no problem with BN leadership at the national level. Their perception towards BN is mainly influenced by UMNO and BN leadership image in their own area, with the UMNO division chief and electoral candidate in GE-14 being perceived as unknown and unfriendly to youth aspiration. The media also has a huge impact on youth perception, access to information on this borderless new media is easily within reach. Every political party leader must shield themselves from actions potentially damaging to their integrity, and being negatively viewed by especially young voters as a result. A leader with a clean image and clear vision is more appealing to voters, aside from their abilities to address issues concerning youths, such as unemployment, home ownership, and education funds. Youths are the main national asset, and leadership by example has to be practised to ensure the continuation of a better and more prosperous government for all Malaysians.

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