

State Government Without Opposition in Terengganu



The recent state elections marked a momentous occasion for Perikatan Nasional (PN) as it achieved a historic clean sweep by securing all 32 seats in Terengganu's state assembly. This resounding victory is seemingly emblematic of the "green wave" engulfing Malaysian politics.

The absence of opposition in Terengganu's state government raises several serious questions about democratic governance and the functioning of the political system. The Islamic party Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) would be the ruling party without any effective counterbalance from other political parties for the next five years. This occurs when one political party dominates the legislative and executive branches of a state, resulting in little or minimum representation from other parties. While this has certain advantages, such as faster decision-making processes, it also has some downsides that may have an impact on the state's democratic health.

For a democratic nation, a 'clean sweep' victory often marks the beginning of a tussle with democracy. The concept of a single-party system is conventionally linked to countries like Russia or South Korea, but is unheard of in Malaysia.

As PN supporters celebrate their remarkable victory, concerns mount over the implications of an assembly devoid of opposition. A big question looms: what will it mean for Terengganu to have a single coalition govern unopposed?

Democracy in Terengganu at Risk

The risk of injustice and abuse of power within centralised governance is very high in any concentrated authority. This is where we see the importance of a robust opposition as a balancing process.

PN has acknowledged the dangers and concerns of governing without opposition. In response, they have stated their intent to establish government-supporting backbenchers whose role will be to provide constructive criticism and suggestions for the government, as an alternative checks and balances. Hadi Awang has gone on to state that PN will encourage a culture of government criticism from citizens, with plans to establish official channels to allow citizens to express their opinions and suggestions.

Opposition pressure and demands are crucial for a functioning democratic institution. The state government's response in aspiring to establish backbenchers is an appropriate and necessary step.

The Terengganu Government will still need to specify clear indicators regarding the governance of a government without opposition in a democratic country. Questions like "what are the benchmarks for the government's administration and the overall integrity of its leaders?" and "can the soon-to-be-appointed backbencher coalition effectively exert pressure and demand accountability as genuine political opponents?" need to be addressed candidly.

Potential Implications of Single-Party-Rule

Rich in natural resources, Terengganu is a state locked with immense economic potential. Terengganu's 2023 Budget, comprised RM1.991 billion for Operating Expenditure; RM500 million for Development Expenditure, and RM30 million for Water Supply Expenditure, and outlined three core approaches for implementing the 2023 Budget: Nurturing the People, Driving the Economy, and Preserving Development.

According to the Socioeconomic Report by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), particularly within sub-sectors like wholesale & retail trade; accommodation and food & beverage services, as well as government services, positive growth continues to be evident, amounting to RM 37.3 billion in 2022, representing a growth of 5.9% compared to 3.3% (2019) and 2.5% (2018).

Beyond the petroleum and gas sector, Terengganu is diversifying its economic ventures with projects like 'Cristobalite' and 'Ultra Purity Industrial Silica' in Marang. Notably, the recently established Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the creation of a novel industrial hub centred around quartz ceramic products in Cheneh, Kemaman, stands as a significant government-backed investment. These endeavours collectively account for a substantial RM3 billion in value and are projected to create 4,050 employment opportunities.

However, the pace of economic development in Terengganu must go hand in hand with a healthy democracy. Therefore, the recent State General Election results that have led to centralised power within the public administration could have new implications on the overall decision-making process. Some of these implications include:

1. An unopposed government has the potential to make decisions without undergoing a process of checks and balances. Checks and balances are fundamental democratic mechanisms that distribute power across different layers of the political system to prevent any individual from exerting complete control over a particular matter. This poses a significant risk, particularly when it comes to mega projects or any situations involving huge allocations.
2. Undermining the State Legislative Assembly Proceedings. This process is a critical checks-and-balances process where all flaws and transparency involving state policies, or detailed discussions on mega-scale projects, are deliberated upon. The function of democracy during legislative sessions cannot be complete without a critical opposition. The voting process is expected to experience disruptions.
3. Potential marginalisation of minority groups. Prevalent sentiments within the Chinese and Indian communities in Terengganu are characterised by concerns of neglect and extremism under the PN government¹. This, in turn, has the potential to create social inequalities and foster discontent within the state.

Political competition is crucial in fostering a dynamic and empowered policy environment, encouraging innovation, and ensuring thorough policy scrutiny. A strong opposition provides robust criticism, offers diverse perspectives, and efficiently identifies weaknesses in government activities.

Policy Recommendations:

Several steps can be taken to mitigate the risks of single party rule:

1. Under the Terengganu State Constitution and the Terengganu Government Enactment, State Assembly members (ADUN) can be appointed without going through an election process based on specific conditions set to represent groups within the community that have no representation at all. Terengganu should consider an opposition line that is critical that does not support the state government. The critical opposition line is a must in order to have a well-organized and efficient administrative structure. For instance, Singapore and adopt measures like the Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) scheme to ensure checks and balances, similar to how it operates in parliamentary elections.
2. Often referred to as the “fourth estate,” the media can wield significant power and influence over policymaking through its capacity to influence public opinion. An independent and critical media can prevent abuses of power, ensure transparency and enrich public discourse by providing a diverse array of perspectives on various issues.
3. Similarly, the contribution of civil society entities such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and advocacy groups cannot be overlooked. They play an instrumental role in raising awareness, mobilising public support and challenging and advocating policies in the best interests of the state.

Conclusion

The recent electoral outcome in Terengganu serves as a poignant reminder of the nuanced relationship between democratic governance and political dominance. The absence of opposition and the prospect of a singular ruling party amplify the significance of democratic checks and balances in upholding the principles of representation, transparency, and justice.

Whilst the future of Terengganu under absolute PN governance remains uncertain, it is evident that other entities must fill the void of an absent opposition to safeguard democracy.

