Rejected Votes: A voting issue among Orang Asli community

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In January 2013, a group of Orang Asli voters from different parts of Perak and PKR Perak leadership individuals protested at the office of Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (JAKOA) to express unhappiness about a voter education session conducted in Tapah (December 2012)

Pakatan Rakyat Perak alleged that during the voter education training session, the Orang Asli voters were forced to mark for the BN candidate in the dummy ballot in front of a JAKOA officer and a BN State Assemblyperson. Then State BN Assemblyperson of Air Kuning, Datuk Samsudin Abu Hassan admitted the intention of the voter education session was to teach Orang Asli voters who caused many rejected votes in GE12 (2008).

In 2020, the Bersih Inclusive Electoral Reforms in Malaysia report highlighted the issue of poor voter education among the Orang Asli communities with anecdotal evidence that voters of the community may not know how to cross the ballot correctly. With all of these reports in mind, it is

important for us to understand the prevalence of rejected votes for this community.

Definition of a Rejected Vote

Usually, the term "Rejected Vote" , commonly known as "Undi Ditolak", is wrongly referred to as a "Spoilt Vote", or "Undi Rosak" in Malay.

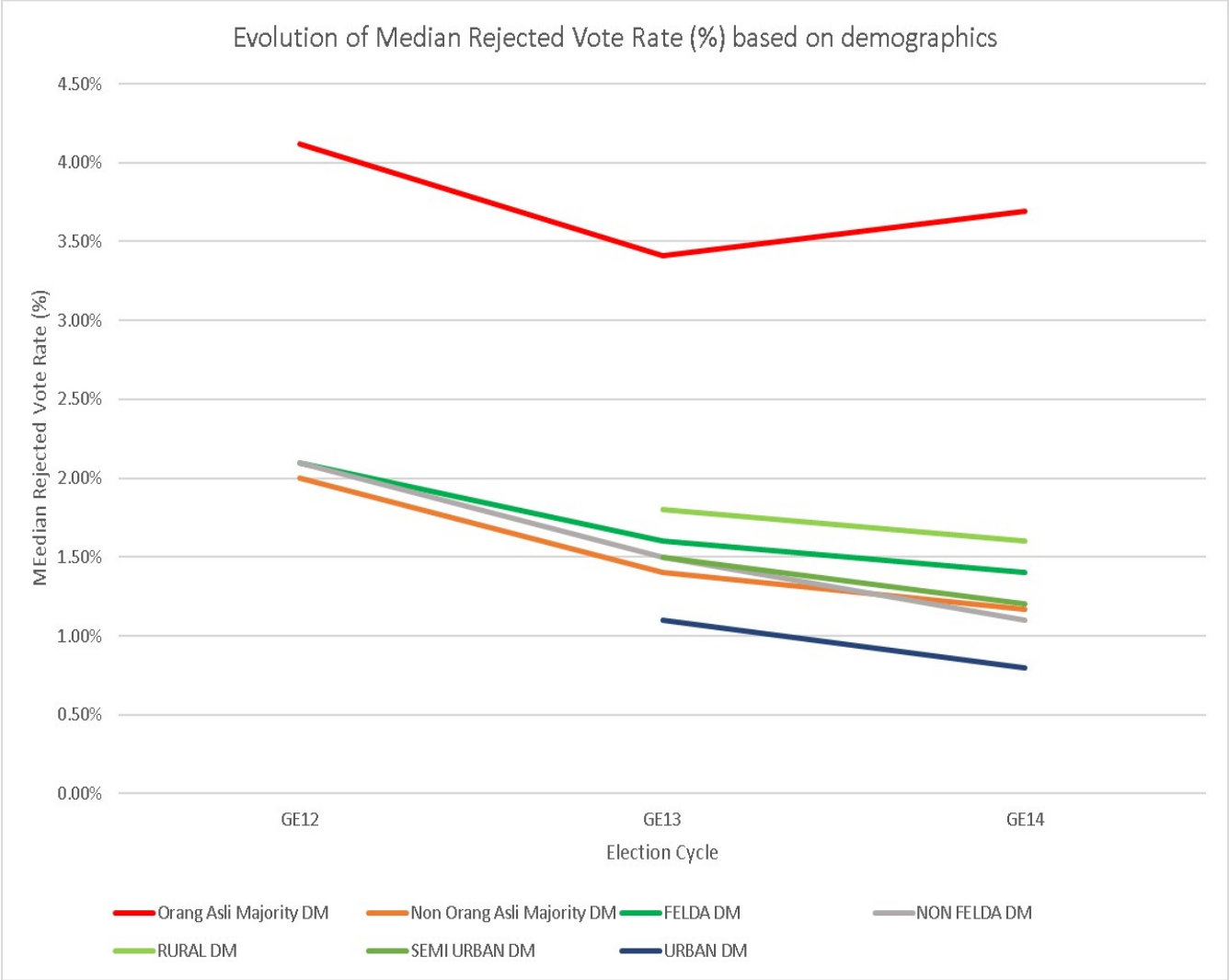
A spoilt vote occurs when a ballot paper (before marked by the voter) was torn or the ballot paper became unusable. Information of spoilt vote is recorded in Borang 13 (Borang 13 Penyata Kertas Undi) at the end of the polling process.

A rejected vote is different — it takes place in one of three scenarios: when the voter preference is undeterminable, when the voter marks for more than one candidate, or when the ballot has a marking that can be traced back to the voter's identity. Information of rejected vote is recorded in Borang 14 (Borang Penyata Pengundiaan Selepas Pengiraan Undi Negeri/Borang Penyata Pengundiaan Selepas Pengiraan Undi Parlimen). Between the spoilt vote and rejected vote figures, information about rejected votes are found in public domains (government gazette)

Statistical Analysis for the 14th General Election (GE14)

During the GE14, rejected ballots constituted around **1.32%** of total votes issued to the voters. When the constituencies are divided by ethnic majorities, Bumiputera Sabah majority seats constitute the highest average of rejected vote rate (RVR) of **2.40%**, while Chinese majority seats constitute the lowest average RVR (close to **1%**). For the urban class, these seats had an average RVR of **1.07%** while rural areas had an average RVR of **1.81%**. However, this statistic masked of high prevalence of RVR of a certain community

While the Orang Asli electorate size was barely **1%** of Peninsular Malaysia electorate in GE14, the implications of RVR among their communities should not be underestimated. Our study has shown that RVR for Orang Asli majority polling districts (DM) is three times for non Orang Asli areas in Peninsular Malaysia. The RVR gap between Orang Asli and non-Orang Asli areas has grown since GE 12. For GE 13 and GE14, due to multi corner fight and high rejected votes in the competitive Cameron Highlands seat, MIC won the seat with a razor thin margin. More than **50%** of the rejected votes in Cameron Highlands for GE13 and GE14 came from Orang Asli majority DMs. Due to serious implication of RVR of this community, we conduct interviews to understand the reasons behind the Rejected Vote



Graph 1: Evolution of median rejected vote rate by DM demographic attribute (Peninsular Malaysia only). Only the Orang Asli majority DMs have shown not only a high Rejected Vote Rate but also showing an upward trend.

Protest Vote

One of the interviewees for our research was Bob Manolan, the former PKR Senator (representing Orang Asli communities). He agreed with our statistical research about the high prevalence of RVR among Orang Asli communities. When he was asked for reasons behind the issue, he raised two main factors for the rejected votes: poor voter education and protest vote. He stated that voters are not taught properly on marking the ballots and for GE13 (with introduction of indelible ink), some of the Orang Asli voters wrongly used the ink to mark the ballot paper.

He is of a strong opinion that rejected votes among the community is a reflection of a protest against the current system or political parties. Being frustrated by election promises, the voters used rejected votes (marking all candidates in the ballot paper) to express this protest. He also sensed that GE 15 may witness a greater level of rejected votes from the community.

Poor Voter Education (Personal Experience)

Abu Libut, a local at Kampung Sungai Kiol (Pahang) whom we interviewed, explains the lack of awareness — especially among young Orang Asli voters — when they are voting for the first time.

“If there are three spaces on the ballot paper, I would fill them all up because they were not given clear directions on how we should properly vote,” explains Libut. “If there was an election tomorrow, we would usually be told to vote for a particular candidate when political parties conduct their voter educational campaign.”

This causes confusion among voters, especially among the younger ones, as they would receive instructions or guidance to vote for a candidate when multiple voter educational campaigns are being hosted in their village nearing election season. In fact, Libut was confused when he first started voting, but his voting experience allowed him to reflect on his mistakes.

Conclusion

With strong statistical evidence which is backed by interview findings, the issue of rejected votes among the Orang Asli community should not be underestimated. This research should spur greater call of action for Election Commission and other groups to strengthen voter education and awareness of the polling process. If unaddressed in time, this issue may play a decisive factor on who wins in GE15

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