

Najib's 'presidential' image makes waves
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INTERVIEW With the BN's reputation in tatters after the 2008 general election and the slow recovery of its component parties, premier Najib Abdul Razak has created his own brand image to win back support.

Merdeka Centre director Ibrahim Suffian, offering this insight, said Najib is adopting a strategy of rising above communal party lines, and taking over the task of wooing support among ethnic communities which the component parties themselves have failed to do.

"There is a clear effort to brand Najib separately from parties that he represents as chairperson of the BN. So you can see 'Brand Najib' - (it is) almost presidential, as he meets directly with the people, bypassing problematic component parties."

This, said Ibrahim, has been a strategy consistent with wooing younger voters who tend to vote based on a leader's image, although older voters have remained staunchly supportive of parties.

"I would like to emphasise that Malaysians, by and large, are still party-centric in their identification... (But) with younger voters, it is slightly different. They tend to identify less with party and more with leaders," he said.

"So younger Chinese voters, for example, would be quite predisposed to Nik (Abdul) Aziz (Nik Mat) or Husam Musa of PAS, for those who know of them, or Nurul Izzah Anwar (of PKR) - because of who they are, instead of which party they represent."

Ibrahim (right) noted that voting for parties will remain relevant in Malaysian politics.

"For example, Umno continues to have a strong cache of support from Malay voters and elicits a negative reaction from Chinese voters. The party is still important, but some key leaders can strike a chord with voters and pull support to their party," he said.

"Indian voters in rural areas have gone back to support the government in a large way, maybe not as such as high level as before 2008 but it is noticeable enough to give BN a better chance in the seats that it contests."

Based on the outcome of by-elections held since 2008, he said there is a clear trend among Malay voters to favour BN. In marginal seats like Manek Urai, PAS won by a mere handful of votes, but it lost Galas.

This, he said, was due to Najib's reform efforts as well as communal fear-mongering by the government-owned media.

"If you look at the Malay papers, it is quite clear that they are talking to the Malays that they need to support the ruling party so that the Malays won't lose political power.

"I think a large numbers of Malays buy that. It has increased and shot up the support base of Umno in the last few years."

Winning youth over

Ibrahim suggested that communal politics, while less significant in urban areas, play an important role among rural voters though other dynamics also comes into play.

"With rural voters, it's a combination of (wanting a) practical livelihood as well as ethnic politics, and it is very region-specific.

“In Malay-dominated states, ethnic politics are not as evident, but in mixed-ethnicity areas like Perak, Selangor or Negri Sembilan, ethnic politics will come into play as (voters) go to the ballot box.”

A key challenge for the BN will be to win and retain the youth vote, he said. While this age-group is generally anti-establishment in outlook, it can sometimes be temperamental in its choices.

“I think we find that young voters are quite fickle, they can be susceptible to media impressions especially in a heightened emotional atmosphere of an election or (when a) scandal (takes) place.

“In 2008, the majority of young people voted for the opposition... Since then, I think the youths had moved back to BN, (but) may have shifted again to the opposition (some time) this year. I would say they are now leaning more towards the opposition.”

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