

Najib Club's 'cool' way to win young voters
Malaysiakini.com
September 24,2011

As the prime minister tries to push the cool factor to gain youth support, a little-known club seems to be hitting the right notes.

Established in April, the Najib Razak Club, or now rechristened NRC11 to "keep it cool", appears to be targetting the right demographics as Najib's project - young voters.

But those attending the club's events would be hard-pressed to find anything ostensibly political about it.

The group of do-gooding youths (mostly alumni of the United Kingdom and Eire Council of Malaysian Students, UKEC) organise talks, do charity work, participate in futsal competitions and watch football at mamak restaurant television sets.

And unlike Najib, (above) who is forthcoming about gaining political support from the 'bro's out there, hardly anything about NRC11 - the number 11 because that is the PM's favourite - smells of politics.

"The NRC11 is a club that carries out nation-building initiatives to positively benefit our community and people. We believe in the values, vision and ideals of Najib (Abdul) Razak, our prime minister, but we are not linked to any political party," its slick website reads.

According to the website, the club supports the PM's transformation plans and exists because it wants these plans implemented.

"We know that no government is perfect and there are times when they make mistakes and wrong decisions. And we don't always agree with them... That is why they have to know what people think and why," it states.

Upin & Ipin and nation-building

Malaysiakini's peek into one of their programmes, the Nation-building Series talks, this time by the brain behind the popular animation Upin & Ipin - Burhanuddin Md Radzi - found something akin to an entrepreneurial talk.

Fifty-odd attendees who huddled at the centre of a ballroom of the upmarket Hilton Sentral listened to the former oil and gas man delve into the mechanics behind his animation company, Les' Copaque.

The captive audience, in their twenties or early thirties, appeared engaged and were enthralled at how Burhanuddin had even allowed pirates to promote his products.

Not much different to popular conference Ted Talks, the Nation-building Series appear to be a celebration of Malaysian success stories, and whatever message was sold that night, the audience appeared to be buying it.

Others who had previously spoken in the series include journalist Karam Singh Walia, football commentator Shebby Singh and Talentcorp chief Johan Merican, with the first talk in May by Performance and Management Delivery Unit (Pemandu) directors Alex Iskandar Liew and Eugene Teh.

The plush venue raises questions of funding, but organisers insist that it was Burhanuddin who had foot the bill. The next talk by Leadernomics founder Roshan Tiran, is also scheduled there.

Other activities, they claim, is through corporate sponsorship by companies who despite their generosity appear to have opted not to announce their association with the club.

Sources close to the club also reveal that the PM has also privately visited NRC11's office at KL Sentral, raising questions as to whether it receives direct backing from the man himself, financially or otherwise.

Najib's only public appearance with the club so far was on June 26 for a breakfast event at a nasi kandar restaurant on June 26.

"The Najib Razak Club (NRC11) first meeting at a nasi lemak restaurant in Subang Jaya was a lively and warm event. Great to meet them all," the PM tweeted as endorsement that day.

Benign but powerful club

The presence of maps marking constituencies marginally won by BN on the office walls also raised eyebrows, but organisers insist the maps have nothing to do with the club and were put up "just for fun".

They also deny claims by sources close to the club who indicated to Malaysiakini that the club, albeit "benign", is part of "a larger strategy for communications and personal branding to push the centrist agenda".

The convenors maintain that the PM is not behind the club, but that the idea had struck youths attending one of Najib's meeting with his 'Facebook friends'.

Whatever the club may be, experts believe they are sending the right message.

Jay Jaboneta, who pioneered the social media branding team for Filipino President Benigno S Aquino III, said through the club Najib is saying that he is taking the younger generation seriously.

"Rarely does the head of state reach out like this. I think this is a good move on the PM's part and should really be taken in a positive light.

"This is sending a message to Malaysia's youth that the PM is looking at them as partners in nation-building and as future leaders of Malaysia that he's not only investing time and resources to woo them but he is also investing in people and organisations to equip them and be prepared for the future," he said in an email interview with Malaysiakini.

Jaboneta, whose work for Aquino involved using social media to become feelers for the president, however, added that naming the club after the prime minister may not be too wise, other names like Future Leaders Club would better present the nature of the effort.

Universiti Malaya political scientist Noor Sulastry Yurni Ahmad, (left) whose area of study is young voters, also gave the move a thumbs up, particularly after similar efforts in South Korea gained success.

"It shouldn't be viewed as cosmetic... this approach was used in a big way in South Korea to target youth and it provided a platform for the young to connect with the leaders."

In South Korea, she said, sports is very popular among the young and used as a vehicle to reach youth voters with much success.

"I believe selling Brand Najib will enhance BN's (appeal) among supporters," she said.