

A budget for the polls battle ahead
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By Neil Khor

Budget 2012 is a bag of goodies. Even the mainstream press is calling it an "election budget". There is no attempt to disguise the "do or die" battle ahead.

Several columnists have even asked the government to take advantage of the good mood generated by the budget announcement to hold the elections quickly to make the best of things.

An election budget, like the power to call for an election at the moment most suitable for the government of the day, is an example of the power of incumbency. It gives special advantage to the government to win as many votes as possible.

NONEA full belly will mean citizens are more likely to close one eye to its short-comings. All the government needs is for citizens who are not inclined to it to not go to the polling booths.

For those who are about to shout out loud that this is an unfair advantage and therefore morally reprehensible, the answer is do not be naïve.

If the situation were reversed, the politicians on the other side of the fence would do the same. The point of politics is to come to power and once in power to stay in power forever.

Political power, the complexities ahead

The problem is stay in power to do what? As Malaysia becomes wealthier and more educated, the point of politics becomes more complex.

If in the 1950s, coming to power was coming into one's own, to be independent of colonial rule; "Merdeka" was no longer enough to stay in power in the 1970s as citizens wanted "development".

That mantra finally expired in the noughties (2000s) with the emergence of urban voters with aspirations beyond having water, electricity and a roof over their heads. There was just so much Suria KLCC can do to win their votes.

In mature democracies, a change of government is no big deal. It allows the exhausted party to return to the Opposition bench to mull over their ideology and address their shortcomings.

It also allows those from the Opposition bench to be in the seat of power and learn that with power comes responsibility.

NONETHis has happened in Penang, Kedah and Selangor and the tenor of the Opposition is certainly more measured than before when they had no experience of governing.

The same cannot be said for the Opposition bench in those states, many of whom are unused to not being in power and a few still delusional enough to behave as though they have not lost power.

Lessons left to be learnt

One would like to believe that politicians have finally figured out what happened in the 2008 general election and that moving forward we are heading towards a better Malaysia whichever side wins. The Opposition's case is quite settled.

Their alternative budget shows that they are able to come up with coherent policies if they come to power. No doubt a bit idealistic but at least it is not one of those budgets cooked up by well-meaning but completely unrealistic products of idealism.

As for performance, the electorate will have a chance to judge based upon their performance in Penang, Kedah, Selangor and Kelantan.

The case today is that of the BN government. An election budget is an indicator of whether the government is on the right track, whether it feels the pulse of its citizens.

But it is very much a double-edged sword, revealing whether the government is only interested in short-term gains.

Dubbed a transformative budget, there is little doubt that the government is giving most to its vote bank: rural folk, civil servants and pensioners.

The first group is more dependent on government policy and because of the way parliamentary constituencies are delineated is a major vote bank. With rapid urbanization, one rural vote is worth at least three urban votes. It makes sense to give this group the most of the budget.

The second group, civil servants, who are supposed to be loyal to the government of the day, used to be another solid vote bank.

Malaysia has never seen a change of government and after more than five decades, civil servant loyalty is passed down from generation to generation.

But four states are governed by the Opposition, so it is important that civil servants be kept happy hence the special allocation for them and the retreat from Mahathir-era reforms that attempted to promote based upon performance rather than seniority.

Yearning for the past factor

Lastly, pensioners are the best bet not because they are most dependent on government generosity but because they remember a BN government that was stable and powerful.

NONEMany would be happy to return to those days and will do everything to put aside whatever dissatisfaction they may feel towards the government of the day because of inflation and other life challenging issues.

What one may ask is really transformative of the budget? Will affirmative action be based upon need rather than ethnicity? This was the New Deal that the MCA promised if voters would return its candidates to power.

What about the "open tender" process practiced in Opposition-held states like Penang? These states seem to be chugging along fine with development and foreign direct investments flowing in.

In the case of Penang, bumiputera contractors have come out to defend the state government for its fair distribution of contracts!

Obviously, the allocations for governmental vote banks is its prerogative and one cannot begrudge fellow Malaysians from this balm that they will soon receive. But a responsible government will use the budget to meet future challenges as assiduously as winning votes.

For a budget that takes into account a future global recession, minimise budgetary leakages and invests in Malaysia's future competitiveness is winning future vote banks.

Eight years from today, more than 70 percent of Malaysians will live in urban areas, the current vote bank of the government would become irrelevant.

More acutely, with rapid technological developments, the gap between urban and rural is fast disappearing. There is little doubt that an opportunity may have been lost to truly transform Malaysia and build up its resilience to face a volatile and more difficult world economy.

Yes, a few votes may have been won and for a government that feels itself under siege, crucial votes to remain in power. It seems, to remain in power to deal with a yawning deficit and face more challenging times, is a noble intention indeed. Lets hope the government of the day has not forgotten why it wants to remain in power.

Usually, the Auditor-General's Report will be released together or slightly before the Budget. Why is this not the case this year? The government must know that it is suffering from a trust deficit. It cannot continue to practice the old type of policies associated with the 1950s and 1970s - give them piped water and electricity, throw money at a problem - and hope to win the next general election.

The Auditor-General's Report will have to be released at some point and all the feel good feelings now will surely dissipate. It seems the lessons of the past remain unheeded. It is not how much money is allocated, it is how it reaches the people.

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