

## **Scandal-ridden BN on the ropes?**

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COMMENT It has been some three months since I last wrote an article for Malaysiakini. I have, nevertheless, kept up with the issues that continue to glue Malaysians to their computer screens, iPads and mobile phones. Even the mainstream media cannot keep Cowgate off its pages!

There is little doubt that the next general election will happen in 2012. Every pundit in Malaysia is saying June. One cannot continue beating the war drums and delaying the date of battle.

For the opposition, the elections of 2008 never ended and they have been prepared for a long battle. Few remember now that nobody expected Pakatan Rakyat to stay together.

NONE One senior member of a Chinese kongsi told me that he did not expect Lim Guan Eng (right) to be CM for more than six months but now sings the CM's praises.

Instead, what looks most brittle is the BN as a coalition. The decision to put up winnable candidates will apply across the board.

This means less seats for Umno's traditional partners the MCA and the MIC; and the other component parties. This cannot go down very well with the component parties.

There are five major problems that will adversely affect the BN going into the 13th general election. All are related to unresolved scandals.

The first has to do with senior BN partner the MCA. In almost every poll and judging from the by-elections results, the MCA is not able to bring the majority of the Chinese back to the BN fold.

Scare tactics lose fear power

Try as hard as he can, Chua Soi Lek just cannot bring back the Chinese voters. The same is true of the BN's Chinese-based parties in Sabah and Sarawak.

The MCA's last ditch attempt to "scare" the Chinese by painting a scenario where the Chinese will be a majority in opposition without governmental representation did not work as well.

The problem with this argument is that the Chinese already feel that the MCA has little say in government whilst the DAP is doing so well in Penang.

But more revealing is the recent attempt by MCA supporters to use social media to get their ideas across. The Chinese New Year video was immediately turned on its head.

NONE An alternative video featured prominently the PKFZ scandal and Chua's own private sex scandal. Voters are not about to forgive the MCA for its bad handling of PKFZ.

The on-going trial of Dr Ling Liong Sik and Chan Kong Choy, if unresolved decidedly before the next GE, will be cannon fodder for the opposition.

The loss of face for the Chinese community who associate the MCA with their own sense of identity as Chinese Malaysians (definitely a small and decreasing lot) will find it very hard to hail Chua as their representative. The loss of face from the scandal is really a big deal.

The second scandal that is draining support away from the BN and that points to a fundamental flaw in the BN coalition has to do with Sarawak Chief Minister Taib Mahmud.

Recently, in the Sarawak state elections, Taib showed KL that he continues to deliver the votes. His position is entrenched but his reputation continues to suffer from attacks both internally and from overseas.

The excesses involving the "development" of Sarawak continues to be highlighted in the international press. In the blogs and social networking spheres, Taib Mahmud has become an icon of the BN's inability to transform.

Losing streak set to continue?

Whilst the BN has successfully faced such problems head-on and survived, the recent Sarawak state election has raised alarm bells.

The PM is no longer as confident as before about securing a two thirds majority. An Umno that does not have more than 90 seats in parliament will be more dependent than ever on coalition partners.

Mahathir was the worst performing Umno president, winning about 70 seats in 1999, and Pak Lah the second worst with 79 in 2008. Both PMs required the support of their coalition partners to rule.

NONE If Najib Razak cannot reach the 90-seat mark and his peninsula counterparts do not perform as well, he will most likely be dependent upon Taib (right). This does not make the BN a very stable or likeable coalition.

The talk in town is that Malaysia will have a deputy prime minister from Borneo and most likely Umno will have to give up the seat. Such a bleak future scenario is destabilising for the BN.

The third scandal is on-going and needs no introduction. Cows have never been very interesting animals but combined with a politician they have had considerable attention-grabbing effects recently.

Shahrizat Abdul Jalil's ministership may be over but her refusal to step down as Umno Wanita head and BN Wanita chief is a godsend for the opposition.

Whilst the PKFZ scandal is long-drawn-out and complex and the excesses of Taib is a world away, the National Feedlot Corporation scandal is easy to understand.

Cow scandal refuses to vanish

The government gives one a computer loan but we use it to buy a bike. Is this okay? Only if you are related to a minister, comes the answer. It is simple to understand and can be used in the rural areas most effectively.

NONE Of course, if it was any other minister, it would be okay but the Wanita Umno chief is something else. Wanita Umno is supposed to be the safety valve for the party.

It was the buttress that helped heal wounds behind the scenes. Its members are dedicated and would go house-to-house to campaign, reversing opposition "lies".

But to have the burden of explaining the leader's own "problems" is an additional burden the wing simply does not need.

It remains to be seen how this will hamper the campaign but extra resources will now have to be deployed to shift attention away from a very easily understood scandal.

The fourth scandal or scandal-to-be involves national security. Despite all the scientific explanations and reassurances from the PM himself, Lynas is not going away.

That the plant will be built in the PM's home state means the latter will have to battle it himself. This really should be handled more professionally and by Lynas itself but the PM has taken up the cudgels and will now have to make sure that he is able to overcome fears of environmental pollution that come with such industries.

More damagingly, Lynas recalls Bukit Merah and all the other previous environmental disasters that have come to our shores through government initiatives.

Similarly, and in Pahang as well, are the gold-mining activities in Raub and alleged poisoning of rivers. This scandal is on-going and will cost the BN a lot of votes. The crux of the matter is that citizens will be asking: "Can we trust the BN?"

The fifth and by all accounts not the last scandal, involves Felda. Here the PM is trying to "unlock" the potential of Felda and turn it into a global plantations company.

Nothing wrong with this noble intention but it recalls all other projects of this nature that ended up begging the nation. The question here is does the BN really know how to manage the economy and the Malay forward movement?

Felda is unlike other projects. It is a scared cow and a symbol of BN-led progress. Now in the hands of the son of the man who started it, is the PM sure that his vision will be realised in the hands of men who have, in the past, performed less than sterlingly?

NONEs he able to convince the Malays that the incorporation of Felda will be that special transformative ingredient that will provide Malays with a more secure and progressive future?

These five scandals (and scandals-to-be) will determine the fate of the BN in the next general elections. Two of them, PKFZ and Lynas, will influence urban and semi-urban voters.

The rest will create more trouble for BN in rural Malaysia. But fundamentally, Malaysians will have to judge whether the BN, in its handling of these self-created scandals, can be trusted with our future and what guarantees will we have that Pakatan can resolve them better.



