

Regime change looms large at GE13

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A very young demographic profile, a high urbanisation rate, ever increasing access to the Internet and extreme longevity in power, among other factors, will be working against the BN ruling coalition in the coming election.

There are many reasons for the international community to be deeply cognisant of this fact, and to prepare for a regime change for the first time since Malaysia gained independence in 1957.

Soon after the government suffered severe setbacks in the 2008 general election, the country went into a permanent campaign mode, and has remained that way ever since. Another general election has to be called soon, since the constitution requires that Parliament be dissolved by April 28, 2013 upon the completion of its five-year mandate.

It may be true that the government won 140 of 222 seats in the Lower House while the opposition managed to secure the remaining 82. But a closer look shows that the actual gap between the two coalitions to be much smaller.

The ruling BN actually won only 51.4% of the votes while the greater opposition gained 48.6%. Of the 7.9 million effective votes, BN and the Pakatan Rakyat were separated by a mere 313,509 votes.

As of the end of June 2012, there are 12.9 million Malaysians on the electoral roll. As many as 2.5 million of these - about 20% - are first-time voters; and it is these who will decide the outcome of the election.

The 13-party ruling coalition will be highlighting past achievements in its campaign and playing on the appeal of the status quo, while the opposition coalition vows to improve governance in the country through radical policy changes.

The status quo message is however unlikely to have an impact on an almost Arab-spring demography: 48% of Malaysia's population are below 25 years old and 70% are below 40 years old (though not all are voters).

The BN, especially its kingpin Umno, has always relied heavily on a rural vote bank. It has therefore good grounds to worry since as many as 70% of Malaysians now live in cities, compared to 11% in 1957 and 35% in 1980.

The young and urban are highly wired online as well. With 17.5 million Internet users, Malaysia's Internet penetration rate is 61.7% of the population and 81% of the populated areas. On top of that, Malaysia is also one of the most active country on Facebook, with 12 million users, ranking 19th in the world.

The easy access to alternative information has undermined the efficacy of the control over the mainstream media exercised by the government, be it through licensing procedures, censorship or partisan ownership.

Longest serving elected ruling party

The BN has been ruling Malaysia ever since its earliest guise, The Alliance, won a self-government election under British auspices in 1955. It is now the longest serving elected ruling party in the world. The only longer serving ones, are the non-elected communist regimes in North Korea, China and Vietnam.

The many negative signs of this political longevity are all too visible to the increasingly sophisticated voters. Essentially, not only has the government over the years alienated non-Malay ethnic groups through its race-based politics, rampant corruption and intra-ethnic economic inequality, but have also driven Malay voters away.

BN had for quite a while styled itself as the moderating force in the ethnically charged population. However, after Umno began turning right in 2005 both in rhetoric and in action, it began losing ethnic Chinese and Indian support. In 2008, significant numbers of ethnic Malays frustrated with corruption and cronyism joined this movement to vote against the government.

This sense of alienation has not diminished in the intervening years. On the contrary, more groups are showing open dissent against the central government.

The Kadazan Dusun Murut group in the state of Sabah is strongly aroused and highly critical of the government's handling of the long-standing citizenship-for-votes scandals that allegedly allow Umno to build up its support base in the state.

Umno strategists, using the party-controlled newspaper, Utusan Malaysia, and the affiliated right-wing group Perkasa, are working overtime to stop the dwindling of their Malay support base, and are doing all they can to portray the party as a fiercer ethnic champion than opposition Malay parties and leaders. So far, this seems to be alienating more middle-ground voters.

Across the board at the moment, what Malaysians seem to be seeking is greater economic equality as well as an open and clean government. And yet, Prime Minister Najib Razak continues with micro-level vote-buying measures such as giving cash handouts to strategic groups at a time when the country is in great need of macro-level reforms.

The long years in power has also seen the BN generate its own worst enemies. Many leaders in the opposition were formerly from the ruling coalition, including former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

Their experience in government has been serving as a much-needed reassurance to voters that the opposition is ready to exercise power efficiently, while their personal networks within the system has brought valuable information and understanding of the system that had previously eluded the opposition.

Previous opposition coalitions (in 1990 and 1999) were hastily formed during election time and they easily collapsed soon after. An alternative coalition that has been tested for more than four years, with that has gained substantial administrative experience in governing four out of 13 states is in itself a novel - and critical - factor.

While all the built-in advantages that favour BN in an election have not disappeared and those that remain will be put to full use in the electoral contest that is to come, the factors that work against the government have been gaining strength as well.

For the first time ever, it does look very possible that the old government will be voted out.

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