

What they don't tell you about elections

MalaysiaKini.com

April 4, 2013

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What are you voting for in the coming general election? When you mark your ballot paper, are you voting for who you want as prime minister of Malaysia?

Parliament has just been dissolved, but for months now, we have been inundated with billboards, television advertisements and snail-mail flyers of prime minister Najib Razak, touting his achievements over the last four years, his proposed policies for the future and why it is important to keep him on as prime minister to realise the dream of a united, prosperous 1Malaysia.

Sometimes, other faces may appear on these promotional materials next to him - usually, the BN candidate likely to be fielded in the 13th general elections in that particular constituency.

But it is Najib's face, endorsement or words that are prominent.

What do these promotional materials say to you?

Do they say, "Vote for BN if you want Najib as your prime minister"?

Do they say to you, "If you want our product - Najib and his 1Malaysia - then the price is your vote for BN"?

The promotional campaign that BN has been running these last few months tries to focus the eye of the electorate on who it is they wish to see as prime minister of Malaysia.

The campaign tries to enforce a simple yet dominant connection in your mind: Najib = BN.

So vote for the BN candidate running in your constituency if you want to keep Najib as prime minister.

But this simple message is grossly misleading.

It gives a false impression about what it is we actually vote for when we step into the polling booth.

When your hand is poised to mark an 'X' on the ballot paper on polling day, you will not be voting for who will become prime minister.

You will be voting for who you want as your representative in the Dewan Rakyat (your 'MP'), and some of you will also be voting for a lawmaker to sit in your state assembly.

It is our MPs, once elected, who get to decide who is to be prime minister.

Under our federal constitution, the king appoints the prime minister, but the appointee must command the confidence of the majority of the MPs of the Dewan Rakyat.

So, making sure that the majority of the MPs come from one particular political coalition only ensures that the prime minister will be from that coalition.

It does not ensure who among the MPs of that coalition will be prime minister.

That depends on who it is the majority of the MPs wishes to be prime minister.

And during their elected term, these MPs can change their minds and place their confidence in someone else to be prime minister.

Is it a certainty that if BN wins a majority of parliamentary seats in the 13th general election, its MPs will keep Najib as prime minister? No, it is not.

The ruling party's words and actions tell us that there is no guarantee that Najib will continue to be prime minister if BN wins the next general elections.

Their words and actions suggest that Najib can only be guaranteed the "confidence" of the ruling party if he wins a stronger parliamentary majority and regains its lost two-thirds majority.

Former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself has reportedly told AFP that Najib could face a ruling-party leadership putsch if he doesn't improve on BN's results in the 2008 general elections and that if Najib did not perform, there will be "some necessity to switch horses".

Mahathir tempered his words a few days later by stating that what he had said was "only theoretical".

Yet Mahathir's 'theory' was not met with a collective public rejection by Najib's colleagues in BN or a public pledge of allegiance to him whatever the margin of his victory at the polls.

Tied to this, the ominous lesson from our recent history, involving Najib's predecessor, no less.

In the 2008 general elections, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was the incumbent prime minister, and plugged by BN to continue as prime minister if it won.

But BN lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority and subsequently, the country lost Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as prime minister.

No doubt, those who voted for the BN candidates in those elections did so anticipating and perhaps seeking Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's continuation as prime minister for another term.

What they got instead about a year later was someone else as prime minister, someone who did not get a mandate at the polls.

Ask yourselves, what are the chances that BN will get a two-thirds parliamentary majority in the 13th general elections?

Are significantly more voters likely to vote for BN candidates in the coming elections than in the last one?

Look to the independent voter surveys and election analyses - do any of them point to a high degree of certainty that BN will capture a two-thirds majority?

Because that is what needs to happen for Najib to be guaranteed his position.

Where does that leave you? You may be one of the many Malaysians with deep misgivings over BN or its component parties, their policies or the direction they have taken the country in the last 55 years.

But at the same time, you may feel that the country is on the right track under Najib's stewardship and you may be willing to give him five more years at the helm, so long as he leads and controls the policies of the party in power.

On the strength of this, you may be ready to cast your vote in favour of whichever BN MP is running in your constituency, in the belief that a vote for that BN MP is a vote to keep Najib as prime minister.

But your vote may not buy you what you seek.

Between your vote and what you seek are 13.1 million registered voters and the internal power play of a political coalition whose policies and conduct you do not agree with.

So when deciding who to vote, look to the party not its titular leader, because the party can change its leadership without checking with you first.

Vote based on the party's policies, track record and conduct, not only on those of its current leader.

Before using the currency of your vote, weigh the costs and risks of what it is you are purchasing.

Ask yourself if you could live with the next level of leadership of the political party leading your country if your favoured candidate gets the boot.

Ask yourself if you are willing to take the risk that the policies of the leader that you favour may expire along with his position in a few months' time.

Don't allow the gloss and spin of the election campaign to be the basis of your vote.

As with the purchase of any advertised product, before casting your vote, find the fine print, conduct your own research and be certain of what it is you are buying.

With the current BN campaign, you are not seeing the fine print.

Not your fault; the fine print is invisible.

But let me summarise what it says:

Seller does not warrant that final product will be as advertised.

Seller reserves the right to replace product with a completely different or inferior product.

The final product provided is non-refundable and non-exchangeable.

And remember: if you are unhappy with the uncertainty of what is on offer, you are free to see what other products are on the market.

Or, choose not to buy this time around.

The decision is yours.

But since your fate is tied to mine, I hope the decision is an informed and well thought out one.

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