

Analysts: BN and Pakatan indulging in populism

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by Nigel Aw

The BN general election manifesto appears to be aimed at outdoing Pakatan Rakyat through populist policies and this competition may not bode well for the country, analysts say.

"It is very unfortunate that this political contest (the 13th general election) has lead towards more populist policies.

"The nation has finite resources and the more (cash handouts) you give, the more revenue you will need or the deficit will increase," political analyst Khoo Kay Peng (left) said when contacted.

Such populist policies, Khoo said, would come at the expense of allocations for other critical fields such as development and education, with this already taking place.

In Budget 2013, the allocation for education was reduced to RM38.7 billion, as against RM50 billion allocated under Budget 2012.

Khoo said Pakatan partly shared the blame for this contest of populism, which started with the culture of cash handouts.

"Pakatan would proudly say if it weren't for the RM100 it gives out (in Penang), there would be no RM500 (under BR1M) from BN. Now BN is raising this cash handout to RM1,200.

"Pakatan should have started with reforms to the system to put a check-and-balance on the government. Giving money is not the way, there will be no end to this," Khoo added.

Pakatan-led Penang has, among others, provided RM100 cash handouts to senior citizens, students and low-income families.

He said this would not bode well with international investors, who would see Malaysia as unwilling to address its fiscal responsibilities.

'Detrimental, but tempting'

Even though the populist BN manifesto could be detrimental to the country, Khoo said, the people were likely to fall for it.

"Sorry to say, it will have an impact, especially on the retirees, for RM1,200 will certainly have an impact. I've spoken to some people and they are looking forward to it, It is an inducement and it is not right," he said.

The BN in its GE13 manifesto promises to gradually increase the BR1M cash handout from RM500 to RM1,200 for those with incomes below RM3,000 a month.

The value of book vouchers for students would also be raised from RM200 to RM300 and school assistance from RM100 to RM150.

Meanwhile, Centre for Public Policy Studies chairperson Ramon Navaratnam (right) said the goodies weren't all bad, but the government must be able to account for its funding.

"It may well be affordable because it is a five-year period, but it will increase trustworthiness if the BN can spell this out during the campaign period," Ramon said when contacted.

He said while the handouts were aimed at reducing the cost of living, the fundamental reasons behind inflation have not been addressed.

"When you have too many licences and permits, too many constraints and controls, when you do not liberalise the economy enough, you constraint supplies and so prices will rise.

"There is a gap between policy and the practice of providing goodies," Ramon said.

'MACC needs more bite'

As for the area of anti-corruption in the BN manifesto, he lauded the promise to introduce special courts to handle corruption but said this was insufficient.

"This is a welcome proposal. You can introduce all the machinery in the world but if you don't hit the foundation of corruption, not much can be achieved," said Ramon, a former Transparency International-Malaysia president.

He said the critical point was for a macro approach, particularly in giving the MACC more bite with the power of prosecution.

"If MACC cannot prosecute and leaves this to the attorney-general, then there are more difficulties and problems because you have two authorities dealing with the same issue," he said.

Ramon called for Malaysia to emulate Hong Kong, where the onus is on the accused to prove that he or she is not corrupt.

"For example if someone earns RM1,000 a month but has 10 houses, he needs to explain. The onus is on him to prove he is not corrupt.

"If he says his great grandfather gave them to him, then check the great grandfather, if he was a hawker, a police or Customs officer, then we can make deductions," he said.

'Structural reforms needed'

Ramon's views were echoed by Society for the Promotion of Human Rights (Proham)

secretary-general Denison Jayasooria, who described the BN manifesto as "comprehensive and achievable" but not addressing structural reforms.

Among the critical issues missing, Denison said, was the strengthening of parliamentary democracy, electoral reforms, independence of the MACC, setting up of an Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission (IPCMC), religious freedom, inequality, urban poverty and local government elections.

"There was also no new commitment to the UN conventions nor strengthening of the Human Rights Commission or national unity concerns such as an Equal Opportunities Commission, as recommended under the new economic model," Denison (left) said in a statement today.

He called on the government to make a stronger commitment to these issues or it would be another five years of the same old situation.

"If it does not, the past approaches of the government will continue over the next five years and major gaps and weaknesses of the past four years will not be addressed.

"This is unfortunate, as there is a strong call for good governance, greater democratic freedom and people's participation," Denison added.

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