

Spirit of reform absent in the BN manifesto

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COMMENT On behalf of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), I welcome the launch of the BN's 13th general election manifesto, which took place with much glitter and fanfare last Saturday night, ahead of the nomination day.

As generally acknowledged, Pakatan Rakyat clearly has the upper hand in launching its manifesto for GE13 much earlier, on Feb 25, 2013, blazing the trail of a healthy political competition landscape.

I wish to congratulate Najib Abdul Razak and the BN for demonstrating openly their "endorsement" of Pakatan Rakyat's initiatives and proposed measures of late.

We are really flattered that even the theme of the BN manifesto, which is "Bringing Hope", (Membawa Harapan) bears a striking resemblance to our "Pakatan the People's Hope" (Pakatan Harapan Rakyat).

Nevertheless, while labels are good as sound bites, I am convinced that political competition, during election campaign periods in particular, must revolve around policy matters and the people's programmes, apart from issues of the credibility and track record of candidates.

As has been stressed by Pakatan Rakyat all along, any contest of ideas and policies should rightly be taken to a higher level, through open debates that can be witnessed by the people in mainstream media, so as to enable fair assessment by the people from all walks of life.

Refusing to debate has blemished Najib

In this regard, Najib's refusal to take up this challenge to a public debate on policies has greatly blemished his image as a credible leader and dampened the legitimate expectations of the people for a healthy political competition culture through spirited discourses on issues and policies.

The BN's persistent disregard for ethics and best practices of a caretaker government was further made obvious in last Saturday's launching of its manifesto, which was broadcast live via the nation's television and radio networks, besides satellite TV network Astro.

Pakatan's rights to such media space have been denied. This constitutes a blatantly unfair electoral practice and an outrageous misuse of public resources by a caretaker government. Nevertheless, I remain resolved to ensure that GE13 will be a battleground for the contest of ideas and policies within the framework of achieving healthy political competition. I have perused the BN manifesto and will present PKR's relevant views from time to time. I have

also directed PKR's policy team to review it fully and present their feedback by today.

In general, I am not convinced that the BN manifesto can comprehensively resolve the people's economic, political and social concerns and move the Malaysian economy forward to the next level of development. Much to the chagrin of the people, the most obvious absence in the BN manifesto is the spirit of reforms, which is crucial to rehabilitate and reconstitute the current, absolutely outdated system, that contains a lot of defects and malfunctions.

No broad-based, holistic reforms

Let me reiterate the failure of the BN's policy framework in recognising the importance of broad-based and holistic reforms from the socio-economic, structural, institutional, political, governance and law perspectives. In fact, Najib has still not got it: Without a comprehensive reform agenda, efforts to raise Malaysia's long-term competitiveness to be on par with other developed nations globally will be constantly constrained.

The BN manifesto also lacks new ideas and is very short on details, since many programmes have been rehashed and repackaged into something with a new look, in contrast to our People's Manifesto. More than 90 percent of the programmes listed are already known to the people, remain too general and lack in specifics.

The absence of fresh ideas was so disastrous that Najib had to swallow the bitter pill and plagiarise Pakatan's proposals to be incorporated into the BN manifesto, in particular the lowering of car prices through a gradual elimination of excise duties by revamping the National Automotive Policy.

Other Pakatan pledges copied are the issuance of individual taxi permits directly to taxi drivers and the making uniform the prices of basic necessity items nationwide, one of major issues for the people of Sabah and Sarawak.

It is clear that the BN manifesto is half-baked and borne out of desperation while ours was crafted based on a sincere and earnest desire to alleviate the burden of the people. Committed to a taxation system which is fair and just as proposed by Pakatan, I am convinced that what the people want eventually is a total abolition of car excise duties. As such, up to a 3 percent reduction, as promised in the BN manifesto, is too little and too late.

The major thrust of BN is cash handouts

The BN manifesto is still cast in the perverse and outdated belief that the hearts and minds of the people can be bought. The major thrust of the BN campaign, whether in the form of existing initiatives or manifesto offerings, centres on the Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia (BR1M) handout, which is to be upgraded into an annual payment of RM1,200 for families and RM600 for those unmarried.

This BR1M proposal will cost RM7.2 billion a year that I am certain it will continue to rise

every year, consistent with the natural population growth and the BN's constant failure to increase the household income beyond the qualification levels of RM3,000 for families and RM2,000 for unmarried individuals.

While I am not against any measure that will bring financial relief to the people, direct transfer payments such as the BR1M, Baucar Buku 1Malaysia and Bantuan Persekolahan, as contained in the BN manifesto, clearly constitute a short-term economic policy measure akin to vote-buying.

There are no solid proposals to solve the fundamental socio-economic problems of the people over the long-term, such as monopolies that cause market distortions and price hikes; wastages, leakages and corrupt practices in public finance management that reduce allocations to enhance the people's well-being, as well as other lopsided, oppressive and discriminatory public policies.

Sadly, these costly cash handouts will prove to be an economic policy failure without effectively liberating the people from the shackles of economic hardship in the long run, and increase the burden on the nation's coffers every year. I am concerned that if this culture of over-dependence continues over several decades, all efforts to boost the country's productivity, value-adding and competitiveness will be meaningless.

Proposed measures of war against corruption to eventually weed it out of the system in the BN manifesto clearly form the nation's butt of jokes as a source of public entertainment. Equipped with strong political will and without any vested interests, only a new federal government run by Pakatan will be able to significantly eradicate the corruption disease through our Dasar Banteras Rasuah Negara, as detailed out in the Pakatan GE13 manifesto.

I will continue to give constructive views on this matter and submit to the people's assessment and judgment as to which manifesto is better to bring about the much needed changes. This process of comparing and contrasting ideas and policies will be the main platform of PKR's campaign for GE13, to be carried out by the entire leadership, election machinery and all our candidates.

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