

So, what's so special about May 5?

MalaysiaKini.com

April 10, 2013

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The Election Commission has finally fixed May 5 as the day when Malaysians will vote in their 13th general election, which many believe will be the most competitive showdown in the country's election history.

While some feel that the date, just eight days before the anniversary of the 1969 racial riots, is a conspiracy to remind people of the bloodbath following opposition gains in the general election that year, others find this laughable.

Not that people aren't fascinated by conspiracy theories. However, the fact is that May 5 is also World Laughter Day.

But the 13th general election is no laughing matter, and all political parties, whether in the BN or Pakatan Rakyat, and even the smaller ones such as Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM), will testify to that.

PSM though, may find May 5 an auspicious date as it is the birthday of Karl Heinrich Marx, who is perhaps one of the most prominent figures in socialism.

Dates matter in GE debate

On a serious note, there are a number of dates during the general election week that could have a bearing on the battles to win the hearts of minds of the people, and ultimately, their votes.

International Worker's Day on May 1 is expected to bring to fore the issue of minimum wage, perhaps an unfortunate timing for caretaker Human Resources Minister Dr S Subramaniam, who is facing revolt from small businesses following the implementation of the RM900 minimum wage policy.

And now, the parliamentary seat of Segamat, where Subramaniam is the incumbent, has become a hot bed, for Johor PKR chief Chua Jui Meng will battle there. Meanwhile, Subramaniam will have to face small business owners in the Chinese-majority seat.

Small businesses are upset, saying that they cannot afford to pay the minimum wage, while foreign workers have protested because employers have cut their benefits in a bid to make up for the minimum wage they have to pay.

Despite the discontent of a few segments of society the BN is facing by implementing the RM900 minimum wage, Pakatan in its manifesto is offering to fix the minimum wage at RM1,100.

May 3 is World Press Freedom Day and despite their rhetoric, neither BN nor Pakatan can boast of a good track record in the area of press freedom.

For the BN, despite caretaker Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's ambition of making Malaysia the "world's best democracy", it is only willing to offer 10 minutes of pre-recorded airtime for the opposition to present its manifesto.

The ruling coalition itself had more than one hour of live coverage over several TV channels when presenting its manifesto last Saturday.

The BN did, to an extent, soften its stance on the alternative media after the 2008 general election. However, it appears to have regained its tendency to bar these journalists from its press conferences ahead of the election, while Pakatan started to ban TV3 and Utusan Malaysia from its events.

Lucky numbers

Hard facts and issues aside, superstition is also part and parcel of Malaysian politics when deciding dates, with accusations of using bomoh (witch doctors) bound to emerge during this season.

The number "13" is said to be the lucky number of former Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, or Pak Lah, who dissolved Parliament on Feb 13, 2008, with the election campaign period being 13 days.

This had led to speculation on everything "11" with caretaker Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, who has said that this is his favourite number, including a prediction earlier that Parliament would be dissolved on Nov 11, 2011.

Crystal ball gazers were proven wrong, for Najib proved himself to be a pragmatic politician, choosing to dissolve Parliament on April 3, two days after April Fool's Day.

The belief is that the prime minister holds sway in deciding the election campaign period - and it will be 15 days this time around.

Despite a longer campaign period being attributed as one of the causes for Pak Lah's poor showing in the last general election, the campaign season this time is the longest since 1982, and this is seen as the result of pressure from electoral reform group Bersih.

Longer campaign periods are seen as beneficial for the opposition, since being deprived of access to the mainstream media will make every day an additional day on the ground count for them to spread their message.

Former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad dramatically reduced the election campaign period for first time in the 1982 general election, when leading the BN as prime minister.

Subsequently, he reduced the campaign period from 15 days to 10 days for the next three general elections, and down to nine days in 1999, when the government faced its first credible challenge in as many years from the Reformasi movement. This was further reduced to eight days in 2004.

Not just banners and slogans

While March 8 is also remembered as International Women's Day and former MIC president S Samy Vellu's birthday, "308" came to be remembered as the day the tsunami hit Malaysia's political scene.

Similarly, whatever quirky celebration is associated with May 5, 2013, "505" could well enter the history books as the day Malaysia woke up with record numbers of new voters taking part in the 13th general election.

Within hours of the 13th general election date being announced, DAP had already capitalised on the rhyming sound of 505 in Chinese, "wu yue wu", by adding three more words behind: "huan zheng fu". Put together, they simply mean: "May 5, change government".

DAP's knack for catchy Chinese language slogans was also seen in the 2008 general election (left), when it kept attaching additional banners beside Gerakan's "Keep reinventing" (Zai Zhuan Bian) slogan banners that said "Tou Huo Jian", making it mean "Keep reinventing, vote rocket".

However, much more than just slogans will be needed to win this general election that Malaysian voters will decide on May 5.

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