

Buying support - Najib's 'commercialisation' of GE13

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GE13 SPECIAL The billion ringgit question of this campaign is how much is being spent in the 2013 general election campaign and who is paying for it?

Throughout the country, voters are already reporting early efforts to woo the electorate such as special grocery vouchers of RM300 in Sandakan and handouts of RM50 to attend a Umno meeting in Tanjong Malim, among many others.

The promise of more goodies on the way is being repeated over and over, from the symbolic extension and increase of BR1M (Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia) to more general 'assistance'.

The use of electoral incentives is well-known and honed, but there is a fundamental shift in the overall pattern this time round. Scholars such as Universiti Sains Malaysia emeritus professor Francis Loh have described the electioneering pattern as from one of patronage to 'developmentalism', where voters have moved from relying on everyday personal ties and relations with politicians to the promise of development projects.

In this election, a new pattern of commercialisation has emerged, where the 'You help me, I help you' and 'Let's make a deal' mantras are framing the campaign in what is crassly an economic exchange.

The base money flows, materialism and expensive brand marketing in GE13 cannot be understated, as they represent the dominant strategic mode of BN's campaign.

Najib's RM58bil election primer

Incumbent Prime Minister Najib Razak has systematically adopted this strategy since taking office in April 2009.

He knew he inherited a difficult terrain, and more importantly, he would need to win seats. In the four years before he dissolved parliament to get his own mandate, he engaged in arguably the most expensive election primer in Southeast Asia, and by far the most expensive in Malaysian history.

Gleaned from over 4,000 news reports since April 2009 and a study of the three budgets/supplemental budgets (2010-2013), I conservatively estimate that his

administration has spent a total of RM57.7 billion from after he took over as PM to just before the dissolution of parliament on election-related incentives.

(The primary sources of these electoral-related pledges are from national news agency Bernama.)

The two main components of this largess are politically targeted distributions and 1Malaysia spending. These measures are inherently political as not only are they framed as political tools, they are being openly touted as a reason to support the BN at the voting booth.

As shown in the table, the main share of the election primer is not BR1M in the overall 1Malaysia programmes - this only amounted to RM5.6 billion - but other measures including salary increases and targeted populist initiatives in areas such as school construction from money administered through the PM's Office.

Targeted items include money to taxi drivers, repeated allocations for fisher folks, special allocations for the Danga development project in Johor, a rice subsidy for Orang Asli, special settlement for housing in Hulu Selangor, tricycle 50 percent subsidy support for those in agribusiness, subsidised discounts for students on trains, solar energy subsidies and so much more.

The estimate excludes money spent on special infrastructure projects, which have the spillover of government contracts. These have increased, especially in the defence sector.

Please note that this spending only captures public spending, and excludes the non-transparent donations of mass dinners, entertainers and use of jets provided free by government-linked private businessmen.

I also exclude the repeated announcements of treating different communities to a meal and drink, as the reports are only the tip of the iceberg for this funding. This estimate, and this is only what it can be seen to be an estimate, also does not fully capture the spending by the BN-linked 1Malaysia NGOs, whose funding sources remain ambiguous.

BN spends RM4,363 per voter

The most politically affiliated programmes involve 1Malaysia. Some of the highlights are provided in the table.

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projects are legitimate spending on the part of the government, as they focus on basic needs. The use of cash transfers, moreover, is a common tool to address inequalities.

Nevertheless, what distinguishes these measures from earlier development spending is that rather than be included as part of 'development' strategy or development budget, they are part of a campaign strategy administered through the prime minister, whose main purpose is to return the incumbent coalition to office.

They are short-term tools aiming to please voters and gain their support at the polls. They are like items placed near the cash register at the convenience stores, such as sweets, to make you feel good and buy them, but they are often quickly used up and many are not actually good for you.

Most of these measures are also framed under the Najib-linked slogan of 1Malaysia. They are branded with an explicit tie to the caretaker premier. And given the amount of Malaysian taxpayers' money spent, they are not cheap.

To put in another way, the estimate suggested that the Najib administration has spent an estimated RM4,363 per voter so far. This is by far the most expensive election primer in Malaysian history. Given that money has been allocated to different candidates for the campaign, more money is coming. This estimate should be treated with some degree of caution. Many of these projects are legitimate spending on the part of the government, as they focus on basic needs. The use of cash transfers, moreover, is a common tool to address inequalities.

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Another defining feature of this spending pattern is the use of targeting. There is a clear orientation to find potential groups of voters, identify their immediate needs, and provide it.

Some of my favourite initiatives include those for teachers, fisher folks and young people. Others are narrower, geographically located. If Najib found a group with a legitimate demand, he would try to fill it. It would not matter if you were Hindraf or a Chinese school.

All of this is part of a 'let's make a deal' BN electoral mantra. The modus operandi is similar to that in Umno elections, only this time the pattern of vote buying is extended nationally, with the use of public money to fund the exercise.

'Zaman duit' for voters

The bottom line in the BN's strategy is that it assumes Malaysians can be bought, and that their main motivation is driven by money. This obsession with materialism is a remnant of the Mahathir Mohamad era, where it is assumed that a person's worth is judged by how many houses they own, the cars, or the latest model of smart phones.

'Money politics' is deeply ingrained in Umno. It is also assumed that the dominant paradigm is accruing wealth. They have appeared to have forgotten about the importance of morality and basic principles. Do they not see other needs for society? Do they really think that all Malaysians care about is money?

At the core, they mistakenly conceptualise Malaysians as driven by greed. They are transposing their own values and behaviour on the public.

This is not to say that money does not matter. Over and over across Malaysia, people describe this period as 'zaman duit', especially the young. There is recognition of the difficulties of the majority to make ends meet. This is practiced in everyday decisions such as the choice of restaurant to eat, what to buy at the market and where to send your child to university.

Young people struggle with the high cost of housing, while elderly worry about whether their pensions can cover their needs in their old age and whether their grandchildren will have the opportunities they had.

Yes, Malaysians do worry, and the aim of the cash handouts is to offer temporary relief and in that haze of temporary-flushed finances, they will reward the giver. However, polls have shown that this has had a diminishing effect over time, and the time is ticking since the last BR1M, but BN hopes that come May 5, the giving will have its impact at the polls.

Najib's programmes are geared toward this 'zaman duit', as are many of the opposition's proposals. Yet, there are three important differences in Najib's programme. For BN, there is a more calculated aim of using everyday economic challenges for political advantage.

This can be seen by the scope of the initiatives and is much more raw than most of the opposition's proposals. There is also no real recognition by the BN of the factors that have put the majority of Malaysians in these circumstances in the first place.

And more importantly, there is no substantive strategy to bring about sustainable changes in the quality of life and higher incomes. Many of these measures are short-term, vote-buying deliverables.

Where is the attention to the other needs of Malaysians? Where is the long-lasting investment in the people? Indeed, the 'You help me, I help you' modus operandi reflects a disturbing shallow view of Malaysian society.

Selling BN as a product

It is not just the money and materialist orientation of Najib's electoral strategy that is so apparent. There is another commercial exchange taking place - Najib is offering himself for sale.

Signs across the north use the slogan 'Produk Dahulukan Rakyat Malaysia' next to pictures of the caretaker premier 'People First'. In the Malay heartland, these posters contrast with the 'Kestabilan' posters in the urban areas.

The BN is being described as a 'product' that the people should repurchase. The government is hoping that the electorate is on automatic payment, and will repurchase the 55-year old incumbent coalition.

To back up the purchase is a massive amount of advertising. Traditionally, the government has used the mainstream media for its electoral messages. This time round, they have spent so far an estimated RM100 million on advertising on public websites, billboards and shows - including Malaysiakini.

This marketing is obvious. BN messages are placed in between songs on the radio, on city billboards and lit up like it is the time for a grand sale. How much is the amount of money spent to light up the Umno building nightly? This is well beyond the saturation point.

Why is there this focus on selling Najib? It is part of the commercial approach that rests on the same principles of commercial exchange above. Najib is packaged as a product to buy. The BN is framed as a 'lasting' product that should stay.

The beneficiaries of the branding exercise to date have been the advertising companies that were paid small fortunes for the marketing programme, and they have been the biggest advocates of this strategy.

Do voters buy their choices on brand marketing or is there something more fundamental at work? Are Malaysian voters that shallow that they will respond to political advertising?

Mitt Romney outspent Barack Obama in last year's United States presidential campaign by more than double. The 2012 campaign spent an estimated US\$5.8 billion, a bit less than half of Najib's election primer and not including the advertising and current vote buying efforts. Importantly, this money was raised from the private sector not public funds.

Money is important, and some people will be swayed by it, but not everyone. Romney lost. He spent billions but lacked the human touch, the needed connection to win loyalty and inspire hope that Obama provided through a more people-oriented organisational campaign that was build from the grassroots.

A successful campaign sees people in their totality, not just as materialist consumers. Najib's use of commercialisation is increasingly pushing the electorate to see his methods and his product as past its expiry date.

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