

Shadows of the past stalk GE13 campaign

MalaysiaKini.com

April 30, 2013

By Bridget Welsh

GE13 SPECIAL Less than one week before Malaysians cast their vote in what is arguably the most competitive election in history, the campaign has taken a worrying turn.

In what has been part of a no-holds-barred strategy, the use of fear and division has come to the fore, especially on the part of the BN.

It is thus important to highlight some of the underlying forces that are being mobilised in this fierce contest and shed light on the political and economic interests that support them.

Indeed, this election is bringing to the surface many of the challenges of transforming a political system that has fed on insecurity.

Stoking emotions over religion

With regular reports of the hudud and 'kalimah' (Allah) issues supposedly dividing the opposition featuring prominently in the mainstream press, and older stalwarts in the opposition being provoked to react often by a swarm of mainstream media journalists peppering questions to misquote and take out of context, the aim is to show that the opposition cannot govern while simultaneously stoking fears of religious marginalisation across communities.

PAS is continually painted as the harbinger of the dark ages, cutting off hands and wiping out non-Muslim freedoms. While the DAP is characterised as an enemy of Islam, which will undercut the position of the religion. These are very strong negative caricatures that do a disservice to the complexity of the issues and are just plain wrong.

Everyone appreciates that there are differences between the Islamist PAS and DAP, and these differences are part-and-parcel of the reality of the diversity in the country. Malaysians themselves are divided over religion, with many Malays supporting the introduction of hudud laws and others opposing them. Views also differ on the contentious 'kalimah' issue.

One has to distinguish between the right to have different beliefs and the introduction of these in government. Pakatan Rakyat's manifesto is clear that the

opposition agrees to support the religious freedom of all communities and decisions would be made on consensus. Many devout Muslims also appreciate that the country's moral foundation needs priority.

Legally, any hudud measure has multiple obstacles, from the passage from the Royal Council to a two-thirds vote in parliament. This is not going to happen in today's political context. As such, the fear provocation is just a political ploy harping back to early decades of misunderstanding and distrust.

In search of healing

For five years, the opposition parties have worked together to strengthen their common ground. The Pakatan manifesto is not calling for the imposition of religious law or taking the rights away from communities. Rather it is calling for greater introduction of shared religious principles.

The most prominent of these is the reduction of corruption in the system. It is also calling for honesty and more transparency. It is searching for healing, with a focus on justice. We see also the underlying clarion call for common respect and dialogue across faiths, a practice that only enhances bonds and mutual understanding.

The overall record of the opposition governments in office has been to protect faiths and enhance shared principles. One thing that unites the opposition is the shared interest in forging a moral compass in governance, where greed, impunity from the law and religion used to promote division are not the norm.

This is not to say the process will be easy. Anything in life worth fighting for is never easy. Globally, Malaysia's opposition stands out for bringing difference together. Arguably, no where in the world has the bond between secular and Islamists groups been stronger. Nevertheless, the hudud and 'kalimah' issues are not going away, and discussions will continue.

It will take mature leadership to bring the dialogue away from the polarised simplistic mantra of the past towards a more nuanced discourse. This will rest heavily on the skills of younger leaders from both sides of the political fence.

Najib Razak's government projects itself as a model for multi-ethnic religious cooperation. Yet, BN has been at the helm of promoting difference, and its record on religious understanding is mixed at best. Many of the sensitive issues of religion have been put in cold storage in the wake of the emotive church bombings in early 2010.

Its tactic to woo the non-Muslim religious institutions has been largely financial, with money given to repair and construct houses of worship, rather than to deal with the underlying concerns.

Whoever wins this election, the fact is that these issues are not going away anytime soon and will require a more inclusive dialogue for a more robust long-lasting respectful engagement over religion. Differences over issues is normal, what is important is how those differences are handled.

Mahathirism and racial insecurity

Besides the issue of religion, there has been the open use of racial insecurity as a means to mobilise voters. The formula is one of old politics - that of the bygone Mahathir era. Malays have been told their position is going to be usurped by the Chinese, while the Chinese have been sent threatening letters suggesting another May 13 riot.

DAP leader Lim Kit Siang continues to be accused of provoking the 1969 riots, even though he was not in Peninsular Malaysia when they happened.

NONERacial propaganda based on factual inaccuracies, such as the 'Tanda Putera' movie - reportedly standing in the wings of mass public showings and currently screened in private - has now become so common place that everything spouted raises questions of credibility.

However, Malaysia has moved beyond this zero-sum racial paradigm. In numbers, the Malays supporting the opposition actually outnumber the Chinese, although a larger share of Chinese support the opposition. Pakatan's support is multiracial and the ethnic composition of its candidates highlights that politics is moving beyond race.

NONEMahathir and Mahathirites such as Ibrahim Ali and Zulkifli Nordin want to hold it back, to move Malaysia back in time. The purpose is simple - to hold onto power. The tactics aim to scare, but where the BN is miscalculating is that their efforts are being interpreted very differently than in the past - as a case of sheer desperation rather than genuinely transformative.

Najib's record on 1Malaysia is being seriously questioned. How much these tactics are seen for what they are, or struck a cord of doubt will be known in the days ahead.

Political economy underbelly

Clearly, Mahathir and his politics aim to protect and extend his legacy, with little attention to the potential harm they will bring.

While the racial and religious cards are blatant, there are other economic interests at play that are part of this legacy protection. There are vested business interests seeking to keep the current government in power.

These groups comprised cronies with government-linked monopolies, those benefiting from special licences, and the illegal economy that is tied closely to those that might turn a blind eye for a payoff. These actors are heavily vested in the status quo and their financial interests and special relationships are tied to the existing government.

NONE It is not a coincidence that wealthy tycoons have paid for dinners of multiple thousands, hosted entertainers at unknown costs, and in some cases are actually contributing to campaign funds for vote buying as well as guaranteeing the votes of their employees and distribution network.

While business interests are always involved in campaign financing, the scope and form of open involvement in this election is greater and more direct. The amount of money is also record-breaking, with lucky draws and prizes galore.

Thus, this is not just an election about the BN, but their economic allies, with many of these actors conditioned on special access and treatment. Many of these relationships were forged during the Mahathir era, as his legacy continues to shape this election.

NONEThe protection of special interests and issues of race and religion ironically have become drivers of change.

They are also raising the level of contestation and emotions, which is spilling over into violence. So far, this election has had the largest number of reports of intimidation and violence in decades, now over 1,400 incidents and three small bombings.

People are nervous as fear is being sowed openly and threats made. The burden now, more than ever, rests on the police to investigate and do their job, for leaders across the divide to look out for the common interest, not self-interest, and for wisdom and restraint to prevail.

It is essential not to let the past cast a shadow on the country's future.

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd
Source: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/228488>