

Two myths set for burial at GE13

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COMMENT Two myths, and the enduring bewitchment they cast on the body politic, were broken at the last general election in 2008 which was the 12th election in Malaysia's electoral history.

The two myths are on course for interment by the time all the ballots are counted this Sunday in GE13.

Their unceremonious burial is vital for a reset of the terms of Malaysian democracy, after the insidious harm done to it during the Mahathir era (1981-2003).

bn manifesto launch 2013 ge13 crowdThe first myth broken at GE12 is the one about the invincibility of the Barisan Nasional which, together with its precursor, Alliance, has ruled the country since independence in 1957.

Only the Institutional Revolutionary Party in Mexico has had a longer run at the helm of a country in the democratic world - 72 years.

India's Congress Party, like Umno-BN, a nation-founding entity, and for that reason enjoyed the special odour of sanctity, lasted only 30 years before the democratising force of gravity brought it down in 1977, aided and abetted, no doubt, by the excesses of a particularly autocratic phase in Indira Gandhi's rule.

By contrast, Umno-BN enjoyed a charmed run, in which its longevity was assured by the initial success of its social engineering programme and, when that programme careened off the rails bringing discontent in its trail, by the ideological disarray of the opposition and the divergent aspirations of a racially and religiously divided electorate.

Thus grew BN's myth of invulnerability such that the most the opposition could aspire for was a denial of the ruling coalition's two-thirds parliamentary majority, the equivalent of reaching base camp in a mountaineer's quest to gain a formidable peak's summit.

Houdini-like getaways

BN's myth of invincibility had long been bolstered by a string of easy victories at the polls, not a few of them by crushing majorities.

This was reinforced by two great escapes, in 1990 and 1999. Both occasions saw BN teetering on the brink of a two-thirds majority denial in Parliament but, in the crunch, the coalition carved out Houdini-like getaways.

A cynical stoking of Muslim fears of Christianisation by then-prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the 1990 election was credited with having averted a denial to BN of its customary two-thirds majority, with Malay votes frightened away from the opposition.

NONE In the 1999 election, PAS' obstinate insistence on its Islamic state agenda drove off the Chinese vote after the Malay one was alienated by Mahathir's crass treatment of Anwar Ibrahim.

The outcomes in the 1990 and 1999 polls proved that the population's religious-cum-racial divisions could be exploited to prevent discontent caused by Umno's misdeeds mounting to government-toppling heights.

So potent was this myth that even as late as November 2007, when all that year saw the steady burgeoning of public discontent against the BN, reflected in a sizeable demonstration in support of polls reform pressure group Bersih on Nov 10, and in the show of force, 15 days later, by the newfangled Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf), an Umno-BN leader could confidently boast that BN, in harness for a half century, could look forward to another 50 years of unchallenged rule.

Among the reasons why its critics feel that even in the face of severe setbacks to Umno at GE12, the party is too hidebound to take heed of looming disaster is the continued presence in its leadership corps of delusional optimists like Mohd Ali Rustam, the caretaker Malacca chief minister. He is presently the party's candidate for the Bukit Katil parliamentary seat in Malacca.

Mega ceramah

The second myth that was shredded in GE12 was that large attendances at opposition public rallies, or ceramah, do not necessarily translate into votes for them on polling day.

This myth has a pedigree reaching back to the 1964 general election when the People's Action Party of Lee Kuan Yew drew overflow crowds in Kuala Lumpur and in Penang.

But PAP wound up in that election with only one seat, which was Bangsar in Kuala

Lumpur.

NONE Further, when sizeable crowds drawn by PAS and its precursor, Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PMIP), in Kelantan and Kedah did not translate into votes until the election of 1990 enabling PAS to regain control of Kelantan, scepticism mounted over the value to an opposition party of large attendances at public rallies.

The 1999 general election campaign witnessed rousing attendances at opposition-organised ceramah, mainly due to widespread public unease with the way Anwar Ibrahim was treated by Mahathir.

In the final vote, Umno-BN pulled off another escape from the consequences of its own unpopularity, leaving the opposition well short of denying the proverbial two-thirds majority to the incumbent governing class.

Thus when PKR's Anwar began in 2007 to campaign for GE12 by touring the country to garner support, and when large crowds were drawn to hear him, the doubts over whether attendance would translate into votes were difficult to tamp down.

Unprecedented change

In the 2008 election (GE12), however, the translation took place, resulting in an unprecedented denial to BN of its traditional two-thirds majority in Parliament.

GE12 saw the breaking of two myths, of BN invincibility and of big ceramah attendances failing to incubate commensurate votes.

kl112 rally people's uprising anwar ibrahim crowd story Since Parliament's dissolution on April 3, the Pied Piper of political reform, Anwar, has drawn mega crowds to his ceramah all over the country.

In fact, his presence on a list of speakers at stops in the opposition campaign circuit has been seen to generate one of those tidal movements from which decisive majorities at the ballot box can be extrapolated.

This could well mean that the two myths that have held the Malaysian body politic in its stultifying thrall for decades are headed for the shredding machine, an outcome that would be a boon for Malaysian democracy.

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