

Time for Malaysians to reclaim the country

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COMMENT Those of us with the privilege to vote tomorrow will decide Malaysia's future. Every so often, perhaps once in a generation, we have an opportunity to decide the future course of the country.

This 13th general election is special because its outcome will decide whether we are truly a matured democracy and a developed nation.

For some 55 years, the BN ruling coalition has been in power and we should be grateful that the stability allowed us to make great progress in terms of infrastructure and economic development. There is little doubt that, barring Singapore, Malaysia has made great leaps of progress compared with other Southeast Asian countries.

However, 55 years is a very long time for any political coalition to be in power. While we have had different leaders as prime ministers, what have not changed are the ideology and the old script of race-based politics. This is not acceptable even to the founding fathers of the country.

Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, to his dying days, wanted a nation state that went beyond the domination of a single ethnic group. Abdul Razak Hussein, after taking over from the Tunku, agreed that a national identity should be allowed to develop naturally, once greater equality in economic terms is achieved.

NONEven the pugnacious Dr Mahathir Mohamad (right) said that by 2020 a united Malaysian nation where race matters less than a Malaysian national identity, is the desired outcome that will mark Malaysia as a developed nation.

Unfortunately, Mahathir is now too cynical to accept the reality that this part of Vision 2020 can only be achieved by a new political coalition. The BN, as demonstrated through its actions and policies, is simply too set in its ways.

There is just too much at stake to step out of the comfort zone. Since 2008, if it had carried out radical reforms and shifted power out of race-based parties into the BN structure, it might have taken the wind out of the sails of the opposition.

Tomorrow, Malaysians will have a choice to decide which political coalition can best make us into a developed nation. This is not a matter of tallest buildings, biggest

stadiums or the best roads. This is now a qualitative question.

This is about improving livability, about investing in education and providing opportunities that will enable all Malaysians a fair shot at life. This is not about numbers crunching and percentages. That only convinces the ruling elite, but is not "felt" by the masses.

What is the point of super-development in Iskandar if 75 percent of Malaysians cannot afford to live there? What is the point of world-class entertainment parks if 80 percent of those living near them cannot afford the tickets to get in?

Basically, Malaysians deserve much better, taking into account the amount of natural resources we have and our relatively small population. Reforms of incremental change that do little to alter the trajectory of development, will do little to improve lives. If we need BR1M after 55 years of BN rule, surely we have to think carefully about giving Najib Abdul Razak our vote tomorrow.

They deserved your support

For those voting in Penang, it is important to keep the ruling coalition on its toes. Lim Guan Eng runs a tight ship. From my working experience in the past five years in Penang, the state government has been responsive and competent, despite having no previous experience governing.

We Penangites are a critical lot and are not shy from voicing our opinions on public policies. I believe the Pakatan Rakyat-led government has come to accept this special role of civil society.

Trawling through blogs and Facebook, it is very clear to me that my impression of Chow Kon Yeow is correct. He is a very upright and open-minded state executive councillor. To his credit, both the municipal councils in George Town and Seberang Perai are well-managed and led by very able woman mayors. If there is anyone who deserves your vote on Sunday in Penang, Chow is your candidate.

Although I have never met him, BN's Saifuddin Abdullah, who is caretaker deputy higher education minister, is the middle-class choice on election day. He has made his stand very clear that a developed Malaysia is one where we can debate and disagree on public policies openly and intelligently.

saifuddin abduallah taylors 050812Saifuddin (right) has conducted himself very well as a parliamentarian, often breaking ranks with his more conservative colleagues. Although he seems to be a lone voice in Umno, he is the type of candidate

Malaysians want in the legislature.

There are many young and new faces entering the political arena. They should follow the lead of those "accidental" candidates who have risen to the challenges, including Liew Chin Tong, Nurul Izzah Anwar, Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad and the cohorts of the '2008 Generation'.

These young people have revitalised Malaysian politics, just as the very young Abdul Razak Hussein, Ghazali Shafie and Ghafar Baba had done in the ranks of the Alliance in 1957. These young MPs have injected optimism and a sense of possibility that is often associated with nation-changing moments associated with tectonic political shifts.

The '2013 Generation' will have an even bigger opportunity to shape this nation's future.

Zairil Khir Johari (3) Among the younger candidates who are hoping for our votes tomorrow, I gladly give my endorsement to Zairil Khir Johari (left) and Yap Soo Huey in Penang. They have been hardworking and honest in their dealings with public affairs. Zairil and Yap served as special officers to the Penang chief minister and have conducted themselves very well.

Yap will be facing an uphill task in Pulau Tikus as there are some outstanding issues, including the controversial Moulmien Road development outside the Pulau Tikus market that needs solving. Zairil's challenge has to do with a parliamentary constituency (Bukit Bendera) straddling all classes of Penang society, with the controversial cross-channel tunnel as its main issue.

While these candidates may very well be elected to office on the surge of support for Pakatan, they have to remember these local issues once they get our votes. This is the basic premise of electoral democracy in Malaysia.

There is no point saying that parliamentarians are legislators without thinking of wider ideological issues when making policy and reviewing laws. We will see whether they are able to include the community in policy-making as we push for more public involvement in decision-making, post-GE13.

Emergence of two-coalition system

After writing more than 500 letters and articles here in Malaysiakini over the last decade, it is heartening to see that most of the time Malaysians have risen to the challenge when it comes to nation building.

NONE So much has been thrown at us to break us apart. From the sacrilegious act of displaying the head of a cow at a protest against a Hindu temple to the race-baiting of Perkasa, we have conducted ourselves with calm maturity.

From braving tear-gas and water cannons during peaceful rallies by Bersih, a new level of solidarity has been achieved. Despite the violence at political ceramah sessions and when carrying out party work, bullets in envelopes and personal threats; it is the actual sense of insecurity on our streets that is uniting us to demand for real change.

All the titans are out warning us against voting differently. From the bogey of May 13 encapsulated in the film 'Tanda Putera'; economic collapse decried by former finance minister Daim Zainuddin, political incompatibility as seen by Mahathir and the numbers crunching by feel-good Najib Razak; Malaysians continue to stream to opposition ceramah by the thousands, leaving the free dinners and lucky draws of the BN.

Despite BR1M and all other types of incentives; the delible indelible ink; I am confident that Malaysians will go to the election with their children's future in mind. Even the youngest 21-year-old will have the future fixed in his or her mind.

There is really no way of knowing how Malaysians will vote tomorrow, but we should all be proud of ourselves that we have come so far and so peacefully. To the supporters of either the BN or Pakatan, be glad that a two-coalition system has finally emerged.

Now, let us see if we are brave enough to vote for change: reform by way of the ruling coalition or opt for real change through a pair of new hands. It is not how we handle victory that matters, but rather our ability to accept defeat, close ranks and fix our minds on the future happiness of Malaysia that will mark us out as a developed nation.

Tunku Abdul Rahman was right when he said that he aspired to be the happiest PM in a happy Malaysia. What better indicator is there than happiness?

Happy voting, Malaysia!

