

## **Ordinary Malaysians, extraordinary day**

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**By Bridget Welsh**

GE13 SPECIAL On this historic day of GE13, Malaysians are bravely stepping into the unknown. Some are already queuing up to vote, and yet others are waiting for the crowd to disperse before heading out to the polling stations. Every Malaysian knows today will not be an ordinary day.

There are four intense but quiet battles taking place that will shape whether May 5 will indeed bring about change.

NONEThe first battle is a personal one, national in scope, taking place deep in the hearts of every Malaysian. It is a contest over what sort of country Malaysia should be. Many Malaysians are voting for a different moral foundation for the country's politics.

The anger and sense of disbelief of BN governance runs deep, from the issues of corruption to its racial polemics. While there are many Malaysians who strongly support the status quo, among this group are many who question whether something is not quite right.

Indeed, today the country will be voting for its soul.

At issue are dignity, respect, and perceptions of a shared national community. The questions being asked are: What role should principles play in politics? How should government treat its citizens? And, importantly, how should Malaysians treat one another?

This election is deeply personal and it cuts across all communities.

Malay hearts and minds

The most intensive arena where this soul-searching battle is being played out is within the Malay community. Over the last 15 days, focus has centred on the predominantly Chinese political awakening in the south, with little in-depth analysis of the struggle that is going on within the divided Malay community.

For the opposition, they have projected a new vision for the Malays, a community that is confident in itself and assured in the knowledge that their place - both politically and economically - is secure. The message sent has been one in which

there are no longer any wars to be fought and as such fears should not be the driver of political participation. Malays as Malays should be rightly proud of who they are and confident in their futures.

This message has stood in contrast to the BN's projected image of uncertainty, displacement and dependency, pushed quietly in the kampung.

NONEThis battle for 'what it means to be a Malay' in Malaysia has been national in scope, as this battle affects other communities as well.

The urban and young have been more receptive to the positive messaging, while older and rural Malays have not. Among the fiercest contests nationally have been those in the rural Malay heartland states of Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, Perlis, Pahang and, of course, Johor.

It is not a coincidence that Najib visited the Malay heartland on repeated occasions. After all, the national legitimacy of the country's leadership has been closely tied to the Malay heartland. It is also not a coincidence that PAS' efforts at inclusiveness and moderation are being sorely tested in this election as well.

PAS is redefining itself as a national party and the need to engage outside its traditional rural conservative base. Their success today will depend on their outreach to young Malays (as well as support of non-Muslims). This is why they are facing the political reality of appointing and selecting more capable technocratic professionals as candidates.

Umno, PAS and PKR are all struggling with how to represent the Malay of the old, along with the Malay of the present and future.

Throughout this election, Umno has been fighting to maintain its eroding Malay base, and today will show whether its choice to adopt the Mahathir tactics of the past, coupled with money allocations, were successful or whether they failed.

#### Minority representation

The BN is also now facing the music of its many years of marginalising ethnic minorities. The most number of seats affected are in East Malaysia. In this 50th year of Sabah and Sarawak's inclusion in Malaysia, there has been an ongoing political reassessment by East Malaysians about their position in Malaysia.

This has been gathering steam for some time among East Malaysian Chinese, but over this electoral campaign has also struck a raw cord among non-Muslim bumiputera. The Lahad Datu intrusion and Royal Commission of Inquiry into

Immigrants has only served to bring the issues of marginalisation to the surface in Sabah, while in Sarawak, international attention to the alleged corruption of its top leaders and their open disrespect of the Dayaks has awakened even remote communities.

NONEDuring the campaign, the BN attacks on Christianity have evoked emotive responses in these states, and nationwide. The Dayaks in Sarawak and the Kadazan, Dusun and Murut (KDM) in Sabah will determine whether the opposition can win the seats needed in East Malaysia to deliver victory.

These communities have faced years of marginalisation and been on the frontline of the excesses of land development. They are among the poorest in Malaysia, despite coming from two of the country's richest states in terms of natural resources.

The battle for the non-Muslim bumiputeras who used to be the majorities in these states has been intense, with constant 'bombings' of money. East Malaysians will now choose whether to go with a local patron, stick with the status quo or opt for a new leadership coalition that promises them a more inclusive role in governance. Pakatan's victory is dependent on whether their local leaders have built enough trust and outreach to get their messages across.

In the peninsula, the battle over the minorities has been equally intense. Indians have been wooed like never before. Tamil-language papers have featured unprecedented promises, with many of the Indian community receiving record amounts in vote-buying efforts. In Perak, Kedah, Johor, Selangor and Pahang, the Indian community will make the difference in the final tallies.

A smaller group, the Orang Asli, has faced similar patterns of marginalisation and is seen as a vote bank in seats such as Tapah and Cameron Highlands. Some reports show Rela (People's Volunteer Corps) groups surrounding these communities on the eve of the polls.

The strategy has been to tap into the economic and political vulnerability of minority groups, who ironically have been perceived to be marginalised by the pattern of current governance. Today, this battle for minority communities has been heightened as they have the power to determine the majority vote.

#### Institutional integrity

A final battleground involves the integrity of Malaysia's institutions. The entire push for reform since the 1999 election has been about strengthening Malaysia's governance - from reducing corruption to enhancing the rule of law. Today, the

battle for institutional integrity is being fought over the electoral process.

NONEThere has already been worrying reports of electoral disenfranchisement, fraud and administrative bias. Within the Electoral Commission, the police force and government-linked Rela and other paramilitary groups, the battle is on the respect for the rakyat's right to vote and that their votes be counted fairly.

Unprecedentedly, those inside government and government-linked institutions have spoken out about their concerns of electoral manipulation, with leaked reports by army and police officers, airline staff and local government officials.

Those managing the election know they are being watched and assessed, and are under intense pressure to do the right thing. They are the ones who now carry the burden to make sure the lights do not go off at the critical counting time, to assure that voters are only given one ballot paper each and to make sure that the indelible ink does not wash off.

They are the ones to make sure that only Malaysians vote and when the votes are counted, that they are done accurately. The battle for fairness and basic professionalism is critical for the outcome of GE13.

Ordinary heroes

The reality is that all polling and number estimates favour Pakatan, while the control of the system favours the incumbent.

It is a close contest coming down to how 20 percent of the seats will swing. Overall, the tide has moved to Pakatan during the 15-day campaign, but this election is now being shaped by whether the integrity in the electoral process will be respected. This is why there are already concerns with electoral irregularities.

NONERather than give numbers and predictions in this final pre-election piece of this special series in Malaysiakini, my focus has been to highlight the main battles in the campaign. Morality, Malay identity, minority representation and institutional integrity are now being assessed as the voters ink their fingers and decide their leaders.

Traveling across 12 states in 15 days, I have seen first-hand the dignity and graciousness of many Malaysians. Most understand that how the process is conducted is as important as the final result. Despite the dirtiness of the polls and the many negative reports, on the ground there is much to be proud of during this election campaign.

While there is less confidence in the system than ever before, there is great confidence in and among the people themselves. Today, the heroes are ordinary Malaysian voters, who at long last will decide whether 505 (May 5) is about change or continuity, and whether today will in fact become an extraordinary day.

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