

It was not a 'Chinese tsunami'

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COMMENT After Barisan Nasional retook Putrajaya with a simple majority, Umno president Najib Abdul Razak blamed a "Chinese tsunami" for his narrow victory, while MCA president Dr Chua Soi Lek declared the election results will lead to a "two-race system".

At first glance, it is true that many Chinese voters support Pakatan Rakyat. Yet, making simple race-based analyses of the election results not only obstructs us from better understanding the voting dynamics, but can also lead to distrust among the different ethnic groups

NONEThe urban-rural dynamics tell us more about the voting pattern of Malaysians in this election. Just like in our neighbouring country, Thailand, the ruling party holds on to power by the support of rural voters, while the opposition parties are more popular among urbanites.

In Thailand, while reform agendas such as anti-corruption and anti-monopoly gain the backing of middle class voters, populist programmes such as giving handouts are more appealing among the working class and rural voters.

Both the 2008 and 2013 election results show the three political parties in Pakatan winning most of the urban and semi-urban seats in both East and West Malaysia, yet failing to gain major inroads into the rural areas of Sabah, Sarawak and certain states in Peninsular Malaysia. To some extent, such urban-rural division is not much different from Thai politics.

Pakatan's election issues (such as anti-corruption and the abolishment of tolls) and strategies (such as voting for party, not candidate and allowing overseas voting) are attractive to urban middle class voters, but are not able to gain much support from rural voters.

Control over media and resources

In some Malay rural areas, Pakatan leaders work hard to reassure that the rights of Malay Muslims will not be compromised under Pakatan rule, yet do not offer programmes and policies that can improve the living standard of the rural folk.

Of course, the BN control of the media and resources, as well as the Umno's play

on racial sentiments make Pakatan's effort to win over rural people more challenging.

Apart from urban-rural division, geographical area is another influential element in this election, especially among Malay voters. Overall, the Chinese voting pattern is a translocal phenomenon. From Alor Setar to Gelang Patah, from Kuantan to Kota Kinabalu, and also overseas voters, many Chinese Malaysians have decided to give Pakatan a chance to take over Putrajaya.

It is important to note that many young Chinese Malaysians do not support Pakatan based on ethnic consideration, as the majority of them see themselves as 'Malaysian first, Chinese second'.

However, the Malay voters do not form a distinctive voting bloc. In general, many Malay urbanites, especially those living in the Klang Valley, back Pakatan.

PAS retained strong support in Kelantan and Terengganu, but lost some seats in Kedah. In other states, both Keadilan and PAS gained more young and middle class Malay votes, yet failed to make significant inroads into Umno strongholds.

Certainly, it is not an easy task to analyse the voting patterns of Malay voters, as there are differences depending on generation, religious attitude, education background, class, occupation and many other factors.

Of course, just like other voters, Malay voters are rational voters and make their choice based on the performance of the previous government. The defeat of PAS in Kedah is best seen as voters rejecting the inefficient PAS-led state government, instead of Malays Muslims rejecting PAS. Meanwhile, the Khalid administration that performs well has delivered more seats to PAS in Selangor.

In this election, we are saddened by the defeat of progressive PAS leaders, such as Muhammad Sabu and Dzulkefly Ahmad. Yet, we are also glad to witness that both the chairperson and vice-chairperson of Peraksa lost to PAS candidates.

Entry of young Malay MPs crucial

Residents in Pasir Mas, Kelantan who are mostly Malay Muslims, chose the son of Nik Abdul Aziz, not Ibrahim Ali. Many Malays have rejected Perkasa in representing them, yet some are not ready to reject Umno.

Does this mean they are against Malay racism, but not prepared to let go Umno patronage politics?

Zairil Khir Johari (2)The Malaysian Parliament will also be much more interesting with the entry of many young Malay Muslim leaders, such as Rafizi Ramli, Nurul Izzah and Zairil Khir Johari (right).

These lawmakers could set a new paradigm in Malay politics, offering young Malays a vision that is different from Umno's racial and patronage politics. In addition, DAP also has two Malay MPs now. If they do their job well, it will help to improve the image of DAP among Malay.

Certainly, Pakatan supporters can blame BN racial politics and dirty tricks for the Pakatan's loss. Yet, while some Pakatan supporters criticise racial discrimination by Umno, they seldom consider the feelings of other communities, and sometimes internalise Umno-like racialised prejudice in their mindset.

Many Chinese-speaking Malaysians, like myself, are surrounded by the anti-BN sentiments on the Chinese Facebook circle, yet we do not pay enough attention to non-Chinese Facebook users and communities outside the Facebook sphere in Malaysia.

Jumping to conclusions

On election day, a few short videos were posted on Facebook, showing Pakatan supporters interrogating 'foreign-looking' voters. Unfortunately, judging from the questions they asked, some of these Pakatan supporters have become 'unintentionally racist'.

Ironically, many of them are Chinese Malaysians, who are unhappy with Umno's unfair treatment based on skin colour. Yet, they are using Umno-like attitude to treat 'foreign-looking' voters, and subscribe to 'racial profiling', which they should be very much against.

There is also a picture circulating on Facebook, featuring an Indian-looking man with a MyKad with a Chinese name. Some Facebook users suspected that he is an imported 'phantom voter'. I was thinking at that time: Why can't Facebook users see him as a true Malaysian of mix-parentage? Is there any regulation that prohibits an Indian from having a Chinese name, or a Chinese from having a Malay name?

Fortunately, in a couple of hours, there was a clarification that this 'suspicious man' is in fact an Indian who grew up in a Chinese family, thus he has a Chinese name and can speak fluent Hokkien. Such incidents revealed that sometimes, our

imagination of cultural diversity is still trapped in the negative model of BN's racial politics.

Nevertheless, the overwhelmingly support from the multi-ethnic urban and young voters for Pakatan has proved that transethnic solidarity is possible in Malaysian politics. I

In this election, PAS fielded non-Muslim candidates for the first time, while many non-Muslim Chinese supporters carried PAS flags during election campaign. Many Malaysians have come together to breakdown prejudice and build trust.

The way for us to move forward is to leave BN's racial politics and foster transethnic solidarity. We should not only say goodbye to race-based politics, but also to racial profiling and racialised mindset in our everyday lives.

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