

Pakatan can only win by addressing rural poverty

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COMMENT Pakatan Rakyat overtook Barisan Nasional with a landmark 51percent share of the popular vote in GE13, ahead of BN's partly fraudulent 47 percent. This is a tremendous achievement, considering Pakatan has worked together for barely five years.

Pakatan's moral victory came only a dozen years after the demise, by suicide pact, of the Barisan Alternatif. This recovery in fortunes is largely due to pragmatic thinking among the younger reformers in PAS (formerly known as the Erdogan faction, before the Turkish premier unleashed his unimaginative brutality on Taksim Square demonstrators), and the diplomatic skills of Anwar Ibrahim.

NONE Yet Umno has succeeded in dominating the post-GE13 debate, by its predictable hounding of the Chinese. Mahathir Mohamad (right), Najib Abdul Razak, Muhyiddin Yassin, and their party organ Utusan Malaysia have turned the lessons of GE13 into a xenophobic shouting match.

Umno knows it would have drowned in the 'urban tsunami' without its racist platform, and is desperately clinging to its flimsy raft of anti-Chinese policies. We can expect Umno to continue its assault on the Chinese, the DAP, the new media, and youths calling for civil disobedience, such as Adam Adli and Safwan Anang.

Umno sees no alternative but to pretend to champion race, religion and royals. Even after its general assembly in a few months from now, it is inconceivable that Umno can reform itself within the next decade. The party's insatiable vested interests are dug in. Umno's supreme council is dominated by two factions: Mahathirites, and those afraid of Mahathirites.

The handful of Umno leaders able to boast a triple-digit IQ - Shahrir Samad, Saifuddin Abdullah, Khairy Jamaluddin and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah - remain on the sidelines. Umno's prospects can only be considered "transformation", in the same way that food undergoes transformation on its way down, growing progressively darker and more offensive-smelling.

BN reduced to Barisan Rural

When all the hysteria dies down, it will become clear that class differences outweigh ethnic divisions in Malaysian politics, for the first time in our history.

Support for the Umno-PBB axis among urban Malays, Dayaks and KadazanDusunMuruts was badly shaken. BN has been reduced to Barisan Rural. BN's relentless racist polemic and corruption will cement that urban support for Pakatan.

Pakatan now has an opportunity to win over rural voters by concentrating on their socio-economic concerns, particularly in Sabah and Sarawak.

Pakatan has earned some respect among urban voters with a multiculturalist and anti-corruption message, though there are, inevitably, internal contradictions, such as the Kelantan government seizing Orang Asli land.

PAS and, in particular, Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM), have led the way in non-urban grassroots organising. PAS and PSM must keep striving to convert Pakatan to their message of a welfare state, and a shared antipathy towards greed.

PKR and DAP are far more "corporate-friendly". They must now embrace all Malaysians, not just those with political links and internet connections. Pakatan must oppose poorly planned 1Care reforms and the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, since these will potentially inflict greatest harm on lower-income groups.

azlanPakatan components would do well to co-opt PSM into its ranks, and humbly accept that they have much to learn from PSM. PSM's lessons would potentially be far-reaching enough to overcome squabbles over clenched fist symbols or poorly informed diatribes regarding socialism. Socialism is, after all, the dominant model in societies with the highest quality of life, including in New Zealand, Canada, and Scandinavia.

NCR land conflicts remain crucial

Pakatan must prioritise social justice in issues of land reform. This includes forest stewardship in Kelantan, as well as Native Customary Rights (NCR) land grabs in Sabah and Sarawak.

Although Sarawak PKR has represented more than 100 Dayak and Malay communities in NCR court cases, it is clear that many of these villagers voted for BN in GE13. Even so, native communities will undoubtedly look to Pakatan for assistance when their NCR land is eventually threatened by Abdul Taib Mahmud and his partners. If resentful PKR and DAP candidates turn their backs on these communities, they will never advance.

NONEAn understanding will have to be reached. NCR plaintiffs will have to demonstrate that they can rally their communities to vote to protect their NCR land in 2016 and 2018. Failing this, PKR lawyers will withdraw their current practice of representing those communities pro bono.

National Pakatan leaders must win over rural communities by recruiting interns and other volunteers, and paying them a living wage to work in rural Sarawak or Sabah. These young people can contribute to NCR cases, as researchers in legal issues, or oral history.

They can fulfil specific roles in rural communities, such as in water and sanitation projects, and mini-hydroelectric power generation. They will also register voters and raise awareness regarding the electoral process.

Pakatan will also have to shell out for expensive logistical costs to transport voters and polling agents in huge state seats, such as in the Rejang and Baram basins, in the state election, due by 2016. In GE13, Pakatan might have taken Hulu Rejang and Baram, if logistics had been better organised.

The DAP has stated its plan to contest 32 state seats out of 71. Negotiations must begin on seat allocations immediately, building on some residual goodwill from GE13.

The DAP and PAS will have to work for all ethnic groups, and not simply preach to the converted. Sarawak PKR's leaders, many of whom are Dayak Christians, must work harder to overcome the mistrust of many Muslim Malays. These parties need to ditch their traditional obsession with standing as candidates for "YB", and dedicate themselves to groundwork.

They will then be able to inform rural voters, handicapped by patchy access to Sarawak Report, Radio Free Sarawak and the Internet, regarding Pakatan's rural economic plans, as well as Sarawak's crippling land thefts and corruption.

Pakatan needs targeted spending

Pakatan's GE13 pledge of 20 percent oil royalties appears ethereal: a distant prospect for rural people. They are, after all, used to BN candidates routinely breaking promises.

Pakatan has to promise substantially more than 20 percent. Pakatan must commit to channeling this windfall to the poor, through basic infrastructure, agricultural

funding, assistance for the infirm, and the abolition of rural schoolchildren's costs, such as transportation, uniforms and books. Pakatan can achieve this without the corrupt "leakages" in BN's current funding model.

azlanTargeted benefits for the rural poor are an even greater priority than less progressive options, such as scrapping highway tolls, cancelling PTPTN education loans or boosting petrol subsidies, since these are populist policies that benefit all income groups.

Pakatan can prioritise ground-level development through the oil royalties, including universal access to doctors, decent schools, treated water and electricity.

BN has certainly benefitted some of the rural poor, to keep them hanging on, and make them fearful of losing the crumbs of development. Pakatan can only erase BN's advantage in rural seats, in all states, if it beats BN at its own game.

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