

## **What happened in GE13, and what now? Part 2**

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ANALYSIS The first part of this commentary analysed the paradoxical outcome of the 13th general election.

It traced how the election of a reduced BN presence and increased opposition numbers in Parliament has amplified, not diminished, Umno's power - here meaning specifically its power within the nation's government and over the formation of national policy.

It then examined the nature of the election campaign that yielded this paradoxical outcome.

A rejection of Perkasa?

GE13 was a less than explicit, and often inchoate, engagement, or contestation, between two rival views of the Malaysian nation, of what it is and where it was, or might be, headed.

On the one side, Umno/BN, and especially in its appeals to its own power-base in the core Malay electorate, maintained incessantly that the country is and has always been Tanah Melayu - Malay land and the land of the Malays - and that the country's defining Malay identity would now have to be upheld by a reaffirmation and, if necessary, even an expansion beyond previously existing understandings of what that characterisation as Tanah Melayu might mean.

On the other side, the Pakatan coalition stuck to the terms of the agreement binding together its three partners. In a less than fully worked-out way they insisted that Malaysia was, or must become, a land of and for all Malaysians, and was now ready to do so. Or at least to make a common start on that journey - that quest for a shared future based upon a new national understanding and, under the existing constitution, a new principled foundation.

That was the choice that was placed on offer to the voters. If it was the campaign that was waged by Umno/BN that won the day, can it be said that the overall election result represented a rejection of Perkasa by the nation, especially the Malay electorate?

Hardly. That is simply not so.

azlanYes, two Perkasa men who received Umno/BN backing were defeated. But 88 Umno candidates won. And that is more important, that is what matters.

They won on the "Malays in danger, Islam under threat" campaign waged in the Malay media that, as its main election effort, Umno directed at the nation's Malay voters.

The Perkasa position is in effect, as some put it, "Malays on top, now and forever. That is Malaysia, love it or leave it!"

It is a hard, uncompromising position. But that, too, if in slightly more polite and modulated terms, was the essence of the Umno campaign that was projected daily, with ever increasing determination and with increasingly disquieting effect, by Utusan Malaysia and its media consociates to the ever more fearful Malay voters in the rural heartlands.

Two outright, up-front card-carrying Perkasa candidates lost, even though they enjoyed Umno support.

But Umno ran, and won handsomely upon, a campaign which can simply be described as "Perkasa Mild". A Perkasa-type campaign detached from the perhaps dubious or extreme reputation of Perkasa itself. A Perkasa-line not, like the original, angry but one for the somewhat more polite and genteel, and for those gripped by a fearful, and artfully cultivated, collective cultural and political anxiety.

A Perkasa line, it might perhaps be said, for those who might hesitate, not out of fear but even out of basic decency and in good conscience, to be publicly identified with Perkasa.

On the contrary. Perkasa, they might well feel, may be extremists. But Umno is mainstream. And if that is what Umno is saying, if that is the campaign that it is running, well, that line and that campaign, being Umno's, cannot be extreme. That, for some, was the psychology of supporting "Perkasa Mild".

It proved a winning campaign.

A winning campaign, certainly, for Umno. And also, though in a different way, a winning campaign for Perkasa as well.

A winning campaign for Perkasa despite the loss of the two high-profile Perkasa members whose candidacy Umno was supporting.

How so?

In Umno's 88 victories, Perkasa and its stance were lent an official respectability and "normalised" - and in that way given a kind of vindication. Or at least political and moral absolution.

That is how what some political scientists used to call "ginger groups" - or radical pressure groups operating from outside a party upon like-minded "true believers" and sympathisers within it - operate and succeed.

In France in the 1950s one such group - the forerunner of the Le Pen movement of recent years and today - for a while rode high. The Poujadist movement influenced and infiltrated the ruling Gaullists. As they did, as they succeeded in doing so, their strength declined. Challenged by a journalist that his movement had failed, one Poujadist leader powerfully responded: "Not so! We have not failed, we have succeeded! We have succeeded in 'Poujad-izing' the moderates!"

Perkasa, too, may soon be able to make the same rejoinder, the same boast.

With that tune borrowed from Perkasa but played in a minor key, the Umno in very difficult times did not just hold on to what it had but significantly increased its number of parliamentary seats. The costs of its doing so were paid by the plummeting plausibility of its main long-term non-Malay partner parties in BN. They may never recover.

But for Umno it worked well. Umno's number of seats is up by nine, a number not far short of what is now the combined MCA, MIC and Gerakan parliamentary presence of 12.

BN representation from the nation's primary zone in Peninsular Malaysia is overwhelmingly an Umno parliamentary presence: 88 of 100. The old partner parties - MCA, MIC and Gerakan - are now in no position to restrain Umno or to resist its demands. To have its way, Umno has merely to "square things off" with its Sarawak and Sabah allies, operating not as a solid bloc but as a collection of mutually wary contenders who can, if need be, be played off against one another.

From the viewpoint of the practitioners of Umno Realpolitik it is a very satisfactory outcome - even if the party's "hard men" did not exactly envisage this outcome and plan it down to the last detail.

It is, for them, a very satisfactory outcome that was delivered by the success of

their "Perkasa Mild" strategy.

A "Chinese tsunami"?

Recourse to that strategy came, as indicated, with a cost.

It entailed a substantial "writing off in advance" of much of "the Chinese vote" - of the votes of the vast majority of Malaysian citizens of Chinese origins and cultural background. It deprived the leaders of the Chinese partner parties MCA and Gerakan of "face" and credibility and stripped their parties of what was left of their political plausibility.

Yet the movement of voters away from Umno/BN was not, as some have suggested, simply a "Chinese phenomenon".

The same trend seems to have been characteristic, in greater or lesser degree, of a significant number of Malaysians of all backgrounds who reside in and around the main cities, and in their adjoining semi-urban zones.

It was displayed, that is, by most of those whose lives are grounded outside of the electorally "overrepresented" rural Malay heartlands and whose cultural orientations are focused upon concerns that lie beyond where the Umno and Utusan "Malay anxiety campaign" had great cultural reach and political "traction".

The results of GE12 in 2008 had come as a great surprise to some. While some people had seen it coming, others, including those who then ran the Umno/BN campaign, did not. And, as if it had come suddenly from nowhere, they dubbed it a "tsunami".

Things were different this time. The Umno/BN side knew that they were in "the fight of their lives", a fight for political survival. Anti-Umno/BN currents were running strong in 2013. When they showed up in the election results, it could have been a surprise to nobody.

But in politics there are few things harder to resist than a convenient cliché. When the massive falling away of government support became clear, and the BN in the peninsula was left looking very much like a club with only one member attended by a few bemused janitors, the official response, orchestrated by Umno and Utusan, was that what had happened was a "Chinese tsunami".

NONEThe Chinese had defected, it was claimed, they had abandoned Umno/BN. The Chinese were to blame. "What more can the Chinese possibly want [beyond

what they already enjoy under Umno/BNJ” was Utusan’s furious banner headline.

One thing needs to be made clear here.

The expression “Chinese tsunami” is a polite - meaning in-explicit, since it does not use those words directly - way of saying that kaum Cina kita sudah memberontak dan menderhaka, that our Chinese community has rebelled and committed treason.

That is what people who use the expression “Chinese tsunami” mean.

So the issue to be discussed is not whether this second “tsunami” of 2013 was a “Chinese” or a more general and widespread “storm”.

What is needed is to bring into the clear and explicit light of day the underlying meaning of that coded expression and to call to account - for what they mean to say, and what political objective they intend to accomplish by saying it - those who are trading subliminally in this notion of Chinese treason (derhaka Cina).

To react by shouting in exasperation, “how dare they, how dare the Chinese presume to behave disloyally, to indulge in treason!” ignores the fact that those who voted in ways that Umno and Utusan may not have liked were, as Malaysian citizens, fully entitled to cast their votes as they pleased, and to use their votes to say that they did not like what they were seeing - that they did not like the direction in which Umno now seemed determined to drag the country.

The attitude and response displayed by Umno and Utusan are those of a different situation. They are those of the Ottoman Empire. There, every millet (meaning every “encapsulated” national or cultural or religious minority) had the right to manage its own internal affairs autonomously, free from outside interference - so long as they remained monolithically loyal under their own leaders to the sultan and his government.

NONEBut Malaysia in Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak’s time is not the Ottoman Empire in the age of Suleyman the Magnificent or Abdul Majid I.

The point is obvious, but its implications are difficult for some to grasp.

The expression “Chinese tsunami” may be rhetorically evocative. But it is logically and empirically dubious, and its use is politically and morally inexcusable.

What was GE13 really about?

If, as was plainly the case, the Umno/BN campaign pitched to the key, or core, Malay heartland electorate was the "Perkasa Mild" message, how should the Pakatan Rakyat opposition have responded? What should its central campaign message have been?

If Umno/BN was content to run in effect on the Perkasa stance of "Malays on top, now and forever. That's Malaysia, love it or leave it!", then Pakatan should have offered a clear response, a compelling alternative, and a challenge to the Umno/BN line.

azlanIt might have said: "Historically and culturally, Malaysia is and of course remains a Malay-centred society. We do not question that. But at the same time we are all Malaysians, Malaysia is all of us. Malaysia as a nation is the common, shared inheritance of the children of all of its citizens, regardless of the path which they took towards citizenship. Malaysia is a state that is made up of all of its citizens and which belongs alike to all of them."

That was, in effect, the position taken and promoted by Pakatan when campaigning among voters outside the Malay heartlands. But it had to take that position "across the board", everywhere, as the central plank of its platform.

Certainly, it would not have been easy. It is a more complex position than the Perkasa mantra. And, in these matters, simplicity is what works, while complexity invites misunderstanding, both unintended and wilful. And it would also have been risky.

azlanRunning with this formulation would have required Pakatan, and especially the DAP, to make clear that this position was very different from the old "Malaysian Malaysia" notion - an accusation that Umno/BN strategists would certainly have levelled and tried to pin on it as a damning label.

But, hard as it was, that was what had to be done, what needed to be said. For all the dangers, there was no alternative to that kind of courageous political self-definition and self-affirmation.

Instead, Pakatan seemed to hope that by sticking with its familiar themes, it might somehow just get enough votes in the right places and so "fall over the line" to victory. That was unlikely, and even if it had succeeded in getting the basic numbers, it would not have been a convincing victory. Not a basis for assuming authoritatively the reins of national power.

azlanPakatan needed to put this clear challenge to Umno/BN - on well-prepared

ground, as a prospective so-called "game-changer" - in the last week of the campaign. It should have tried in that way to put Umno/BN on the back foot, presented it with a challenge that its people would have had to scramble to address.

Doing that would not have been easy. How might Umno/BN have responded to that challenge?

Either they would have had to say, "yes, we agree with you, that it our position too" - in which case they would have had to distance themselves from Perkasa and dissociate themselves from their own and Utusan's "Perkasa Mild" line. But if that is now your claim, it might then have been put, why are you not acting consistent with your principled position? Why have you so long failed to do so? Either you have been sincere but have failed, or else you have never meant it, then or now.

Or else they would have had to say, "No, we do not accept that view" and then they would have been forced to live with the consequences. Many Malays, urban and rural, might have been happy to see them do exactly that. But, equally, and most awkwardly for Umno, many of them along with many non-Malays would not have been. These people would have considered it the last straw, if Umno had pulled back from the formulation offered by Pakatan or tried to fudge and bluff their way around it.

Doing so would perhaps have cut their core Malay base off, and even morally isolated the Umno itself, from the rest of the country. That was not a price that Umno would have been wise to risk having to pay.

A courageous opposition that was ready to present a clear alternative and which, by offering it, was able to show that it was ready to govern would have put that clear challenge to Umno/BN.

At GE13 in 2013 the Pakatan opposition did not.

It did not even try. Which was strange.

After all, the entire Pakatan campaign embodied and implicitly sent that message anyway.

Their rallies not only said that, in principle, another Malaysia was possible. They were in effect saying in action, by how they chose to campaign, that Pakatan itself was the proof that that other Malaysia was now coming into being; that they themselves and their campaign were tangible evidence that its time had come.

Yet they did not dare say it directly, clearly, explicitly, in plain words. A strange choice.

In sum

In the final analysis, the Umno/BN side, despite the stupendous expense of its campaign and all its related activities, failed to present any clear argument why it deserved to be re-elected, nor any new vision of common national purpose and direction.

It did everything but that. For some it must have been great fun. For some it must have been very rewarding and profitable. But, even though the election was in the end won, the staggeringly expensive campaign simply did not do the job.

Meanwhile, for its part, the Pakatan opposition gave no sign that it was yet ready to govern: that it was sufficiently cohesive and was of a sufficiently clear and coherent common mind to lead the nation.

NONEThe outcome of GE13 sent a clear message to both sides. To Umno/BN, the message was that it will have to do better next time, possibly with far less money and spectacle but far more thought and insight, as well as a deeper appreciation of the good sense of the voters and increased respect for their judgement.

And the Pakatan opposition, or whatever opposition may next take up the baton, will have to demonstrate that it is capable not simply of cobbling together an improvised "no contests, no enemies, amongst ourselves on polling day" agreement that in many ways is no better than the long-tested Alliance/BN model, but of doing more and better.

Which means: generating a new kind of inclusive, democratic Malaysian politics, creating an effective political vehicle to promote it, and devising new policies (and approaches to policy-making) that might give some plausible and substantive reality, were they ever to be elected, to that "new Malaysian politics".

That is the challenge to the Malaysian opposition. Will it be addressed? Will it ever be mastered? And under whose aegis? Under the leadership of Lim Kit Siang and Anwar Ibrahim? Or under new leaders, some whose faces are already familiar and some who are yet to emerge between now and the next great Malaysian contest for government?

Meanwhile, as after past elections, Umno will just get back to the business of

governing, in its own distinctive and (so some would say) increasingly anachronistic way. But, this time after GE13, it is now placed to do so freshly unleashed from some old constraints and able - whether for good or ill remains to be seen - to do far more readily what and as it pleases.

How will Umno use its latest and ambiguous victory? How will it use its suddenly, and perhaps unexpectedly, augmented domination of the nation's political life?

There are grounds for both fear and hope. As always, the challenge will be to resist opting for the easy thing in order, on principled grounds, to choose to do the right thing.

That is not something that Umno has always found it easy to do. That way of acting has often not seemed to come naturally to its tough-minded strategists. Whatever chances may offer themselves, the hard-headed pragmatists in Umno do not often refuse the dubious ones when they are attractive, seem capable of realisation, and look likely to prove politically rewarding.

In the final analysis, if something appealing can be done, they usually say, let us do it! The ability to get it done itself provides all the legitimation and justification - nothing more! - that may be needed in order to go ahead and do it.

When the opportunities that may present themselves are likely to involve some long-standing objectives and aspirations grounded in the mindset of the exclusionary early and mid-twentieth Malay nationalism, the case for prudent reflection, rather than the hurried seizing of the moment and of whatever easy prizes it may have to offer, will not be easy to make.

Let us hope that it will be made and also heard.

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