

One year after GE13, lost in sea of politicking
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COMMENT Today marks the one year anniversary of the historic 13th general election. This election was pivotal in the country's history as the incumbent BN coalition held onto power, with the opposition calls for 'change' unfulfilled.

Scholars have highlighted the fundamental shifts in the power of Umno, the imbalance of the opposition parties, the rise in influence and political awakenings of East Malaysia and the electoral irregularities, among many profound structural changes.

In other ordinary ways, Malaysian politics has also changed, with greater cynicism, insecurities and anger more prominent in public life. This is across the political divide. News reports feature troubling reports of increased racial tensions, political polarisation and continued shortcomings in governance.

This article highlights some of the ongoing dynamics in contemporary Malaysian political life, which are both worrying and offer promise ahead.

There is no question the last year has been a difficult one for Malaysia. Globally, the country came under the full glare of the international spotlight in what arguably will be the story of the year - the loss of MH370. Now everyone in the world knows where Kuala Lumpur is, and the seas and oceans around it.

The persistence of this issue in international headlines for over two months is a reminder of the lack of closure for the families of loved ones on board the missing plane and the country as a whole.

Malaysia has been blessed historically by a comparative lack of crises but MH370 shows the need for better preparation and the need to learn. What is of concern in the failure to properly release even the preliminary investigation report of the tragedy is an apparent unwillingness to acknowledge mistakes and strengthen the country's responses in future.

The context of post-GE13 contributes to this childish stubbornness to embrace improvements. Political wrangling and insecurities are dominating the terrain, with those in power obsessed in staying there and those in the opposition myopically focused on getting there.

Even one year later, the country is still electioneering, with the focus on power rather than the people. This is perhaps one of the most serious losses of GE13 - a distancing of the interests of citizens and political leaders.

Even basic needs are being ignored, as evident by the water rationing. This issue is being

used in a seemingly never-ending political game of blaming and one-upmanship. When will the federal and government leaders sit down and figure out a proper solution to the country's water shortages? The sense one gets is: when the dams freeze over.

The impression is statesmanship is sorely lacking. It is not only MH370 that is missing. Some of this is a product of Prime Minister Najib Razak doing a disappearing act when a controversial issue emerges. When he reappears - usually well after an issue has evoked tensions and frustrations - his interventions are too little too late.

Power at all costs

For its part, the opposition has continued focusing on bringing out the country's problems, with little attention to solutions to these problems.

Many of their messages are often stale, and returning to old solutions. Their main goal aims at changing the government, a refrain that only perpetuates the sense among ordinary citizens that leaders are focused on power, not people. Quality leadership is lost in the sea of politicking.

This void has been enhanced by the loss of important national leaders from political life, from the tragic deaths of Karpal Singh and Irene Fernandez to the quiet voices of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and other leaders who can bridge the divided communities.

This lack of statesmanship is enhanced by the fact that both political sides are wracked in ongoing internal struggles for power.

For Umno, united in its desire to hold onto power at any cost, Najib continues to navigate challenges inside his party, led by none other than his mentor, Dr Mahathir Mohamad. While the current premier appears to have neutralised any immediate challenge, the sense of competition for position is ongoing in Umno, with shifts in positions a constant dynamic.

Najib has proved adept at managing the levers of this party with offers of projects, contracts and other rewards regularly used as appeasement. The reality is that Najib and his associates continue to watch their backs, distracted from governing.

To accommodate the need for funds, Najib has opted to implement the Goods and Service Tax (GST), a measure that has widespread public opposition as shown in recent polls.

While some recognise the need to improve the country's revenue position, especially given the rising debt the country is absorbing and questions arising from that debt (as shown in the 1MDB scandal), ordinary people are only seeing the impact of rising inflation on their already strained finances.

Umno knows that the GST has the potential to be its death knell - a reason it is doing everything it can to break up the opposition through hudud and other religiously divisive issues and the use of institutions such as the judiciary to marginalise political opponents

and parties alike.

Umno rightly fears that the GST will undercut the base of its political support, effectively betraying its base by imposing a higher cost of living and greater suffering. In their fancy cars behind guarded houses, they have lost perspective, unaware of even the price of kangkung.

Hudud returns

If Umno is violating its promise of rising incomes and improved welfare, the opposition has also moved down the road of disillusionment. This is occurring with PAS' Kelantan government's call for hudud.

In GE13 the opposition offered the promise of a multiracial country, a place for everyone under the Malaysian sun. The exclusionary path of Kelantan PAS has already lost the trust of non-Malays as shown with recent polling, as decades of trust building have evaporated. Many non-Muslims feel a sense of betrayal.

The party has effectively signaled that it is no longer interested in being a leader of the nation as a whole, but appears focused on securing its base in the rural heartland, especially in Kelantan where its performance under the new state leadership has been lackluster.

Its public rationale is that the move is for political power, to win support among Muslims. History has shown in that when PAS opts for a more exclusionary path, it is punished at the polls as occurred in 1986 and 2004.

By turning to religious law before better governance and the welfare of the broader community, Kelantan PAS has taken a path that is appealing to its core and distancing itself from the middle ground, especially younger voters.

More attention could be centred on deliverables, increasing jobs and welfare in the state to allow Kelantanese the means and opportunities to stay away from the crimes hudud is supposed to prevent. As shown in Egypt, the party would be better served by working on providing jobs and raising incomes, but this lesson appears not to have been absorbed.

As in Umno, party divisions in PAS have contributed to this undemocratic move. There appears to be ongoing positioning people in the party, especially by those that did not do well in the party polls last November.

While clearly provoked by Umno, PAS has taken a parochial, exclusionary route that not only threatens the opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition, but has the potential to tear at the fabric of Malaysian society in a way that will only bring greater tensions and conflict.

In falling for Umno's bait, DAP has also escalated tensions. The opposition is now struggling to move away from zero-sum politics, as ordinary Malaysians look on in dismay or glee

depending on their side of the political divide.

Kelantan PAS's exclusionary path severely weakens the opposition's ability to represent the nation, as does Najib's similarly divisive move to implement an unpopular policy that will erode his political base, sharpen class and generation divisions (as the young are the most affected), and has the potential to deepen the trend that has featured in Najib's tenure - the continued politicisation of political institutions to maintain political power, from the Election Commission to the judiciary.

Concerns are particularly acute in that both PAS' and Umno's moves place strain on the ability of institutions to govern fairly for all Malaysians. Pressures are already clearly evident. The rule of law especially is being challenged, with now multiple incidents of the police failing to uphold judicial decisions.

Wake-up call from youth

Given the worrying trajectories, is there any reason for hope? Increasingly the frustrations of citizens have featured centre stage, with the silent majority deafened from the political noise - much of it lacking decency and direction. The answer is a yes, but one couched in realism and caution.

The GST rally last week was full of young people urging change signals the expansion of a political awakening in Malaysia. GE13 did not mark the end of this process, but rather served as a marker for new paths and patterns of engagement.

Neither side did a good job of mobilising young Malaysians as shown in the split voting patterns among younger voters, but nevertheless the youth are finding their voice. The anti-GST rally was less about one side or another of the divide, but a loud wake-up call for fairer governance, one in which a younger generation is now leading.

Amidst the 50,000 crowd are leaders for the future, joined by a growing cohort of younger leaders in the political divide that are putting forward important issues such as education, security and the rule of law.

It is important to note that amidst the politicking are voices that are indeed focusing on meaningful issues and appear less obsessed about who is holding what position, be in the chief ministership of Selangor or a cabinet post.

My faith lies most with the young in Malaysia, who along with the sage wisdom of leaders who were socialised in the post-Mahathir era and national oriented civil society leaders, are speaking out and engaging important issues. They offer light in the darkness of the current political scene.

In 2008, I wrote that Malaysians were ahead of their politicians. I also wrote that change would not be a linear process. We continue to see these observations in current political life.

The opposition has the responsibility to move beyond focusing on attaining power and developing capacity to solve the nation's problems by working together and forming a shadow cabinet. Even Cambodia's opposition coalition that has refused to sit in parliament due to election irregularities have one. If the opposition is going to focus on its divisions it might as well get out of the business for running for national office.

For Najib, who has yet to become the label of reformer he has portrayed himself to be, Malaysians are awaiting your reforms, meaningful changes. Your clock is ticking, and already half of the country have decided you have passed your prime. Many in the other half were on the streets last week.

Malaysians on the whole deserve better than they have at the moment, and are rightly frustrated by the exclusionary turns of their leaders, but the fact that they are speaking out and sending clear messages of dissatisfaction offer promise, even if it is less promising than many hope for.

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