

Teluk Intan and cynicism, post-GE13
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COMMENT A razor-thin victory in which Gerakan's Mah Siew Keong obtained almost exactly the same amount of votes as he did in 2013 (20,157 in 2014 versus 20,086 in 2013) may not justify making any major conclusions about what this by-election means.

The result, however, may occasion a discussion about two major contributing factors that are relevant well beyond Teluk Intan. Today's article discusses the first: a cynicism about Malaysian politics post-GE13; and tomorrow's second part, on Pakatan Rakyat's rural strategies.

There has been much talk about outstation voters, and I will not contribute much to that discussion except to say that the turnout could very well be symptomatic of the growing cynicism we have seen since GE13.

I would go so far as to say that this cynicism has perhaps been the defining feature of politics in Malaysia in the last year.

Examining it in detail would require much broader analysis, but in summary, once there was no longer a sweeping, comprehensive change to fight for, those aligned to Pakatan appear to have wasted no time in turning on one another in an orgy of petty politics.

With the next general election still far away, many Pakatan politicians have started looking to their own power bases, both within their own parties as well as between Pakatan component parties.

Strengthening one internal power base too often comes at the cost of weakening another, so it is not uncommon that the general public gets the impression of a pack of wolves starting to devour one another - feeding an already considerable amount of cynicism about politics amidst the Malaysian public.

I suppose what this teaches us is that any viable contender to the BN must have more than the convenience of a common enemy to keep it united and focused.

Front page desperation

Many voters like to keep their politics simple - there are good guys, and there are bad guys; and it is not good for the good guys to fight one another.

Some are particularly passionate about certain issues, while many really could not care less, and would be hard pressed to name any one issue that supersedes the need for

political unity in order to remove BN.

In recent months, we have seen great debates about hudud, relentless trolling by Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (Isma), the great mess that is the PKR elections, the confusion surrounding the infamous Kajang Move, and so on.

Personally, what strikes me most about all these cases is what I see to be a single common thread running through all of them: for people in politics, no publicity is bad publicity.

In essentially every example stated above, some people who were out of the news for a long time were suddenly back in the front pages.

Politicians cannot survive without being on the front pages, and in Malaysia, they have long demonstrated their willingness to let the country burn as long as they get there.

Constructive dissent vs self-aggrandisement

Needless to say, there is a difficult line to navigate. The last thing I would advocate for Pakatan parties is an overly strong, top-down Mahathir-esque type of leadership, where any and all dissent is crushed.

What I think should be advocated for is the weeding out of those politicians who incessantly put their interests ahead of the movement for a better Malaysia.

This is easier said than done, but it is also easier, I think, than some would have us believe to identify and differentiate between the politician who only opens his mouth to further his own cause and the politician who opens his mouth only to further the cause of the movement. We only need watch very carefully, over time.

I think the solution is not as simplistic as “everyone shut up and toe the party line”. Instead, I believe the solution is to refocus and find a new common goal to direct all our energies towards now and GE14.

In lieu of this, there is at present an obvious vacuum, which is being filled by a cacophony of conflicting interests, power grubbing and so on.

This downward spiral is taking place slowly, but surely. At this rate, without sufficient vigilance, can we even be sure Pakatan will exist come GE14?

Furthermore, even if it does, will it be so battered and bruised that little remains of it beyond an empty shell?

New roadmap needed

If Pakatan is to survive, it needs a brand new roadmap. It needs to dictate the terms of the battle (but please, no Kajang Move-esque nonsense), and set an agenda that will unite not

only the component parties (though that will already be quite an accomplishment), but the rest of Malaysia behind it.

Pakatan needs to understand (and more importantly, enforce) the idea that pre-GE13 discipline is required more than once every five years, and never make the mistake of thinking that voters will continue to offer blind support, no matter how they slip up or start failing to perform. Enduring vision and consistency must be something that outlasts general elections.

Failing this, Pakatan will no longer be a vehicle that Malaysians can look to to take them to a new Malaysia, and plans must be begun to find its replacement.

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