

Pakatan must rethink rural strategy
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COMMENT I once shared my ideas about rural strategy for Pakatan Rakyat with a senior politician and old friend. He all but laughed at my apparent naivete.

I suppose I will go ahead and share the same here, one benefit of writing being that one seldom has to suffer such laughter in person.

I think the most important context for this discussion is the nature of democracy in Malaysia. For the most part, we do not choose the people who govern our lives from day to day.

We do not get to vote for the individuals directly responsible for the maintenance of our roads and drains; and we do not vote for individuals directly responsible for determining the quality of our schools or hospitals.

We only get to vote for legislators, beholden to a party that might eventually form a government, that eventually chooses those individuals responsible for the examples above. A most indirect, and to my mind impoverished, form of democracy.

Of course, most voters don't really distinguish between the roles of a legislator and a local leader. To most prevailing feudal mindsets, a voter gives his or her support to raise a leader, who in turn is responsible for guaranteeing the welfare of his or her 'subjects'.

This is especially true, given that most voters in Malaysia literally have no other leader (besides their legislator) who is democratically accountable to them in any way.

In this respect, the rational voter obviously chooses the individual who the voter feels is best poised to contribute most to the voter's welfare, and will be best positioned to help him or her in times of need.

No more parachuting

Again, a majority of 238 is no reason to make sweeping judgments. That said, Pakatan's almost total failure to make inroads into rural areas suggests that some serious rethinking is required.

I think one of the least useful trains of thought, with regard to rural strategy, is the idea that rural areas do not get enough information. While ideology undoubtedly plays a role, I do not think addressing this alone will result in a vastly different result.

The term 'parachute candidate' is thrown about derisively quite often, and correctly so, in my humble opinion.

Another top leader once spoke to me about one of the reasons why candidates were chosen at the last minute. I believe the comment was something like: "If you choose too early, then the others will stop working for you."

Some seven years later, I still think this is terrible reasoning informed by the worst type of feudal thinking. Looking forward to the 14th general election, we must ask whether it is time to consider a completely different approach.

Digging in for the long run

I suggest the following for two-fold reasons. Firstly, because to my mind it represents a better brand of politics, and secondly, because novice though I may be, I speculate that it may lead to better electoral success.

I think parties that are serious about making rural inroads for GE 14 should consider naming their candidates even now. The process for doing so can and should be rigorous, democratic and transparent. Having this much time to prepare also means the said process need not be rushed.

Once candidates are named, the party and candidates should spend years working at truly becoming members of the communities concerned - spending real time, doing real welfare work, and really becoming recognisable faces (recognisable in the good way, one hopes).

What this type of work communicates is: we are here to work for you for the long run, not only during election times; we are one of you through thick and thin, not some outsiders who have little reason to care beyond our own selfish ambitions.

If candidates can put in work that is measured in years, rather than weeks, I think there is a good chance rural voters will respond in a way that they may have responded to Mah Siew Keong in Teluk Intan.

I know this is a lot harder than it sounds, and that there are many seasoned politicians shaking their heads at the thought - having tried the above and run out of resources.

At the heart of answering the question about resources may be an attempt to bridge the burning desire for change in the urban areas and the lack of success of anti-BN parties to penetrate the rural heartland.

Perhaps some of that burning desire can be translated into funding that will be scrutinised carefully to ensure its genuine translation into increased welfare for the rural folk.

The politician mentioned at the beginning of this article said that there was no way Pakatan could outgun BN in terms of resources for welfare, but even if the end result is that BN puts

in more money to counter this move, the winner is still the rakyat - who I wager will remember who started the bidding war in the first place.

I am obviously no expert on either rural or semi-rural politics, and should not pretend to be. However, I cannot help but feel that taking an approach like the one above will not only be more effective, but will also represent a more people-oriented, honest brand of politics.

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