

Opposition needs to tackle rural challenge
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Charles F Moreira

For several years now, I've shared NAN's analysis of the mentality of rural voters which guarantee a string of landslide victories for the BN election after election, despite exposes of corruption and abuse of power.

Prior to waking up to that reality, I previously adopted the elite, Western- educated, urban-middle class reasoning that such exposes would turn the voters against the capitalist ruling party.

In my naivety, I failed to see that the rural folk did not speak English like me, most probably don't read English language newspapers or news magazines, don't watch English programmes on Astro, hardly have any meaningful access to the Internet and even if they did, would most probably not be able to read and understand the discussions going on, which are mainly in English.

Moreover, they would most probably have little time to read political opinions or participate in blogs or anything like that, since economic survival would be foremost in their mind.

The ruling parties of many countries in Asia, like the Peoples Action Party (PAP) of Singapore, the Barisan Nasional here, Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai in Thailand, former Indonesian president Suharto's Golkar are all populist governments, which remain or have remained in power by appealing to the masses and throwing them enough crumbs from their table so they (the people) feel they need them (the rulers).

The ruling parties in Malaysia follow a similar populist approach and additionally, have played the race and religion cards to keep especially the low-income urban and rural voters loyal to them.

Go ask the inhabitants of low-cost flats whether the Barisan Nasional has done them good and most likely they'll say 'yes', despite acknowledging the corruption and factionalism within the ruling party. For them, a roof over their heads and enough food to eat is more important than issues like corruption, human rights, democracy, free press, free speech, freedom on the Internet and so on.

Unlike the urban, middle-class elite, I don't want to resort to contemptuously denouncing the rural voters and urban poor for being interested in their economic well-being at the expense of more abstract stuff. Instead, if the opposition wants to make any headway, it must know how to address their concerns and not take the high moral ground by denouncing them.

After all, the ruling parties in several Asian countries know how to play this game and have won time and again, so the opposition here had better learn too. The only way forward is for the opposition to convince the people that they can provide them with a better future and will take even better care of them than the BN can and while they don't have a track record to show this, they at least should present a comprehensive socio-economic, medical, educational and political plan for Malaysian and show how it will benefit them.

The opposition so far has generally been too good at picking on faults, failings and wrongdoings of the BN and focusing on single issues but not in presenting a comprehensive,

alternative programme for Malaysians.

During the 1999 elections, I took leave and went up to Sungai Siput to help the election campaign of Dr Jeyakumar Devaraj against S Samy Vellu. While Samy Vellu still won, Jeyakumar managed to reduce his margin to about 5,000 votes. Jeyakumar's Parti Sosialis Malaysia does a lot of ongoing grassroots work among the estate labourers and squatters all year round and not just during election time.

Does it come as any surprise that it has been so difficult for PSM to get registered? The BN is not stupid and knows who can be a formidable opponent and who can't. PAS also constantly does grassroots work, too, which is why it's managed to survive, despite some recent setbacks.

Winning an election or making a significant dent in the BN's overwhelming majority is not an easy task and I'll state quite bluntly that any political party which believes that wider access to the Internet, greater prevalence of political blogging and other Web 2.0 stuff will all make a significant political difference is being utopian at best.

The DAP can condemn the MCA for betraying the Chinese community but what does the DAP have to offer the Chinese, let alone others like me? What happened to the DAP's vision of a Malaysian Malaysia? What happened to the DAP's vision of a social democratic Malaysia and what happened to the DAP's links with the organised labour movement like back in the days of the late Dr V David? What are the DAP's comprehensive social, economic, educational, medical and development policies for Malaysia, besides those for democracy, human rights, free speech, free press and freedom on the Internet?

It is not like back in the late 1980s when I had the satisfaction of at least of seeing my DAP candidate win both in the polling station where I was a counting agent for the DAP and in my constituency as a whole. In 1999, I faced the disappointment of being a counting agent for Jeyakumar, to see him lose even in my polling station.

In Thailand, the press is relatively free and gives an illusion of press freedom but the government wants to control the TV stations tightly, as 80 percent of the population watches TV, while 20 percent read newspapers - the old Pareto principle all over again. So the party which controls the TV stations might get to influence the voters the most.

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