

Time is running out for Najib's BN
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COMMENT With each passing day, the 13th general election draws closer. For the government of the day, the next general election will be a severe test. It is do or die for the Barisan Nasional. Whilst most BN leaders acknowledge that crunch time may be round the next corner, the coalition's inability to put its house in order is worrying those who depend on BN rule.

There are five key performance areas that the government needs to address if it is to win convincingly in the next general elections. The first has to do with public perception.

Whilst the current PM is very much more popular than his predecessor, he still pales in comparison with Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Yet, this is not an uncommon dilemma for the son of Tun Razak. Throughout his life, he has had to grapple with his father's shadow and more importantly his legacy.

NONEWhether Malaysians want to acknowledge it or not, Tun Razak's ability to bring Malaysia together from the brink of disaster and formulate a tangible policy that personified the objectives of 1Malaysia by way of eradication of poverty regardless of ethnicity and the identification of work with any one race is a hard act to follow.

Najib's 1Malaysia policy suffers because there is a lack of trust that a government led by a coalition of race-based parties would sincerely implement such a policy. Now, more than 12 months into his premiership there is yet to be any traction about 1Malaysia.

Ironically, the fate of the BN hinges on the successful implementation of 1Malaysia. If the government is unable to implement meaningful change in line with its own slogan, then Malaysians will begin doubt whether the BN is the most suitable coalition to carry out such a policy.

The difference between Vision 2020 and 1Malaysia is that the former was aspirational whilst the latter promises change now. Vision 2020 bought time for the BN to move towards 1Malaysia but the latter announced that the time had come for Malaysia to be a united nation.

'U-turn' not an option

What is more damaging for the BN is that there is no more going back.

For Najib the famous media catchphrase the 'U-turn' is simply not an option.

Without any real change that is demonstrated through policies involving national culture, economic policies and a decisive move towards greater power-sharing within the BN, the perception that the BN is insincere and playing mind-games through 1Malaysia will continue to negatively impact the coalition well into the next general election.

The second indicator is economic performance. The government claimed that it cannot control how the global economy will affect Malaysia.

AZLANThis is partly true. It is telling Malaysians that we need to wean ourselves away from the huge subsidies that currently buttress us from the high prices of fuel and other essential

items. Apparently, it is for our own good that we pay a little bit more for petrol, diesel, sugar, water and electricity. Nothing wrong with that except that at the same time there is so much leakage from the implementation of government policies.

If it allows wastage to continue unabated, the government can forget about winning over the urban constituencies, which are now very multi-ethnic. There is no need to go through the laundry list but suffice it to say that without successful prosecutions and a real determination to rein in corruption, the BN will be wiped out in all urban centres.

Yet, the BN might still continue ruling if the global economy picks up and Malaysia moves up again with rapid growth. But this can only happen if there was a miracle. Most likely, the global economy will splutter before any meaningful recovery occurs. At that moment, growth in Malaysia will most probably be uneven and therefore not uniformly felt.

Growth not enough

If Malaysia does not bounce back with sufficient gusto and with reforms in place, we may just be left behind by our peers. Voters who go to the polls with their children's future at heart will definitely have to think seriously about the opposition's competency but they will have little doubt about the present government's incompetency!

The BN's continued dominance of the political landscape is a result of a quid pro quo with the Malaysian people. So long as economic growth is delivered, votes will continue to flow in. Now, the game plan is different.

It is not enough to deliver growth, economic development needs to be as equitable as possible and must be sustainable. There are also environmental concerns to address. In short, the BN may find itself in the unenviable position of having promised too much and delivered too little. That is bad for perception.

The third aspect that will determine the future of the BN is the quality of politicians who are selected to play a leading role in Malaysia.

The public is more educated and more critical than ever. Is the current crop of ministers and deputy ministers the best the BN has to offer? Even Dr Mahathir once lamented that the BN is too feudalistic.

Component party leaders are required to be given a share of the cabinet position, resulting in the politics of patronage. Khairy Jamaluddin without a cabinet post is most incongruent whilst some ministers continue to sit in the cabinet even when they have lost their parliamentary seats. If the BN is serious about reforms, it might want to disengage party politics from government.

Fourth involves the opposition that remains united despite everything thrown at it. There is no doubt that all the accusations and engineered abandoning ship do not have any real impact on the opposition as political parties. In fact, it has galvanised the PR at a most fundamental level - it has clarified for them a mutual enemy, and in this case it is not an imagined one.

To date this type of political skullduggery lowers public estimation about politicians and lowers the tenor of political debates. Whilst PR is definitely not innocent - it cannot survive if it was - it is the BN that is losing out the most.

For the past four decades, the BN goes to the people asking for a mandate because they are "more reasonable", "more competent", "less extreme" and "more united". In all honesty, can the BN today go to the polls confidently claiming to be all the above?

Ten years lost

More damagingly, Malaysia has truly lost some ten years owing to this low-level and poor standard of politics. Our political leaders do not debate issues with seriousness and intelligence.

No need to point fingers at how all this came about, more important to recognise it as a problem and find the most suitable coalition with the political will to rectify the situation.

Once again, the BN does not inspire any confidence when it comes to intellectual leadership. We have yet to have a political leader from either side of the political divide who captures the mood of the era, sees the opportunities in the current global economic climate and positions Malaysia with a vision we can all believe in.

young voters and barisan nasional Lastly, the rise of the politics of race and religion is an old trick that worked in the 1970s. Its chief proponents believe that it can work once again. The reason for their convictions is grounded in their beliefs. This has little to do with religion but more to do with a misguided view of 'race' as essential.

There is no doubt that it is only normal for us to band together owing to shared traditions, eating habits and dressing. Whilst in the 1970s most Malaysians really did live in self-contained worlds, today we are one of the world's most export-dependent countries. We are also very ethnically-mixed. We also watch a lot of global television.

Yes, on certain days in the year we are acutely aware of our ethnic heritage but on most days we dress similarly, eat at mamak stalls and experience the same mall-filled lives.

Yes, the clarion call of Perkasa is seductive to those who feel that their rice-bowls are in danger but as these people look around, they also know that there exists in the stratosphere an elite class that is multi-ethnic, politically-connected and seemingly immune to the laws of the land.

The longer the government waits to call the general election, the deeper the penetration of PR into its vote bank. But the louder the demands of Perkasa, the more votes the BN loses. Caught in a web of its own making, there is a real risk that the BN might lose power at the next general elections.

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