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Politics of new in Malaysia

A year ago, I sat down with a few exuberant opposition leaders to find out if they really believed that they could capture Putrajaya.

Real or not, they acknowledged, it was an appropriate rally cry that could bolster the confidence of their party workers and grassroots supporters. At least they had a clear objective of what they were aiming for, even if it was the sky then. However, some among the more rational and younger leaders felt that the chances of victory then were not more than 30%. What was more important was ensuring that Pakatan Rakyat — the coalition of three distinctly different parties with ideologies their political opponents alleged were far apart — survived.

PR had to withstand Barisan Nasional's onslaught during the 13th general election (GE13) and ensure that the nascent idea of two party systems or coalitions live another day, and fight another battle, they said.

They felt that if the two-party system survived the test, the next five years would allow the three parties, notably the grassroots, to understand each other better. Their leaders would become more experienced state assemblymen and parliamentarians. They would also have more experience in managing state governments. Crucially, it would give the younger leaders, who are already dominant figures in the current political landscape, more exposure and perhaps increase their acceptance among voters.

They believed that these young leaders would eclipse their counterparts in BN in five years' time in terms of prominence and experience and they would be considered national leaders, especially among the increasing number of young voters. The target was to take over Putrajaya in GE14.

Then things on the ground moved faster than expected. The political ground began swelling — politicians have this uncanny knack of knowing when mass support has started to shift — and the feedback was more than encouraging. So much so that what initially started as a 30% chance became 50:50 as GE13 got nearer. Negotiations over seats among PKR, Pas and DAP become tougher. In fact, parties were already lobbying for Cabinet positions.



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BY AZAM ARIS

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But for PR, that dream is now in the past and it's back to the drawing board. After the disappointment of defeat had subsided and the statistics churned out, it turned out to be not a bad performance after all. The coalition lost but got seven more seats in parliament and 71 additional seats in state assemblies. In GE13, more Malaysians voted for PR than the ruling BN. Of the estimated turnout of 11 million voters, PR got 53.3% of their votes in Peninsular Malaysia and 50.87% nationwide (including Sabah and Sarawak).

Much has been said about the swing of Chinese votes but statistics now show that it happened across the board, with PR getting substantial Malay votes in the urban areas too. The urban swing is a Malaysian swing — not Chinese, Malay or Indian.

And it will be these swing votes — including the younger voters who will register in the next five years — that will determine the success and survival of parties and their relevance. Political parties that opt not to change and adjust to the politics of the new will face the greatest challenge.

What do the young voters, and voters in general, want? It is no longer about personalities, about Datuk Seri Najib Razak or Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. It is about which parties want to serve the rakyat better. And it is no longer about dishing out money, helping the poor and improving the standards of living, which are responsibilities expected of any government anyway.

It is about fighting corruption, wanting better governance and ensuring fundamental liberties are respected. They want the country's governing institutions free from political interference. They want an independent judiciary and an impartial Election Commission and Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission answerable to parliament and not ministers.

They don't want to see financial scandals such as the Port Klang Free Zone, National Feedlot Corporation and National Defence Project involving members of the ruling parties. They want the open tender system implemented. They want politicians — ministers, parliamentarians and state assemblymen — who are hardworking and humble. They don't want those who stoke racial and religious fear for their political agenda.

They want a government that listens, listens, listens and takes action. They want a government that does what it preaches. They don't want Malaysia to be just a popular brand on the shelf, one that does not have an impactful inter-race relations meaning to it.

As I am finishing this article, post-election political manoeuvring is already taking place. MCA party elders want president Datuk Seri Chua Soi Lek to "kindly" resign and PKR deputy president Azmin Ali "laughed off" rumours that he was quitting the party following suggestions that Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim remain Selangor menteri besar. Umno is sending feelers to DAP to join BN while *Utusan Malaysia* is signalling that the ultras in Umno — after being "proved right" that Chinese voters would desert BN — are ready to do battle with Najib.

It seems that the journey to GE14 has already started and political parties and coalitions that sort out their internal problems first will have an advantage.

But to me, GE14 is about voting for a party that is willing to change and adopt the reality of the new politics, and which is led by more young leaders. This is where I believe PR has the edge. Ask ordinary people who are the new, young leaders they look up to and they will likely name Nurul Izzah, Rafizi Ramli, Nik Nazmi, N Surendren, Liew Chin Tong, Tony Pua, Anthony Loke and Nassarudin Tantawi. With BN, it usually starts with Khairy Jamaluddin and Chua Tee Yong, but it then becomes a struggle to name a few more.

During the election campaigns, as a voter in Subang Jaya and Kelana Jaya, I passed a billboard of Hannah Yeoh and Wong Chen — two young leaders from PR — who asked residents to "end the politics of old" and move forward.

And I am of the view that the politics of old — one that emphasises scaremongering, racial and religious overtones, divide and rule, "them and us", controlled media, money politics and the patronage system — will give way to the politics of new and a more responsible Malaysia.

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