

For MCA, wooing young voters biggest hurdle for polls
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OCT 3 — At 62, the MCA's biggest hurdle is to find relevance among a new generation of voters ahead of the next general election widely expected next year.

Despite all the excitement and fiery speeches made by the MCA's top echelon yesterday at the party's 58th general assembly on how it is back on track and all geared for national polls, the question of how it plans to target young Chinese voters remains sketchy.

With a general election likely to be called as early as January, analysts say young voters could make the outcome highly unpredictable.

Equities research firm Nomura said in a report released in July that the number of new voters could reach 9.43 million — an estimated increase of 3.2 million new voters by the first quarter of 2013 combined with 2.58 million registered voters who did not turn up at the 2008 elections.

Barisan Nasional's (BN) margin of victory over Pakatan Rakyat (PR) in Election 2008 was by a mere 384,688 votes.

The MCA is banking on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's reform plans as well as an all-out attack on PR over the contentious hudud law debate to win over fence-sitters.

The MCA is hoping that by playing its cards right — supporting the repeal of the Internal Security Act as well as the review of the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) and Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) — it can tap into a pool of voters generally drawn to the federal opposition.

Party president Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek (picture) even went out of his way yesterday and called for a "New Deal" for the young and future generations of Malaysians. He said the government needed to reach out to alienated youths and abandon long-held policies that no longer reflect the aspirations of the people.

"The younger generation want room to express their freedom, they want a democratic space," MCA Youth chief Datuk Dr Wee Ka Siong said two days ago during the party Youth wing's annual general assembly.

But the MCA has to deal with the bulk of young voters who no longer identify or associate themselves with race-based parties. This new wave of voters is mostly concerned with day-to-day issues that go beyond race — poverty, rising living costs as well as personal freedom.

Former MCA president Datuk Seri Ong Tee Keat has said his party is fast becoming irrelevant because it had yet to implement reforms after suffering its worst electoral defeat in 2008.

"Yes, I agree. Young voters do not relate to race anymore," MCA deputy president Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai told The Malaysian Insider last night after the party's AGM ended.

Asked how would the MCA attract such voters as it is still essentially a race-based party, Liow said: "Even though we are a Chinese party, we never use race issues to gain support, we have a multiracial approach."

In the same interview the MCA leader said the MCA would always remain relevant because it is a party which "belongs to the Chinese."

"The party has a long history, we stick through thick and thin with the Chinese community," he said.

Which brings the MCA back to square one — finding common ground with young voters and maintaining an ethno-centric approach to policies and governance.

The party sailed through the Election 2004, only to limp home with 15 seats out of 40 it ran in the 222-seat Dewan Rakyat in 2008 and 32 out of 90 states seats, barely scraping 30 per cent of the Chinese votes, according to analysts.

As of July last year, PR was leading the voter registration drive, signing up twice the number of voters compared with BN in the first half of 2010.

The DAP was leading the fray, registering 32.5 per cent of 169,838 voters registered between January and June last year.

"We have to engage more with young voters, we know our engagement with the young is not as good as the opposition. We are not there yet. We have to work hard," said Liow.

Realisation is good, but for the MCA, the clock is ticking, and time is not a luxury the party can afford to have.

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