

Najib clicks with young voters
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ONE TEAM: Prime minister sees young people as partners in nation-building

ON Tuesday, Datuk Seri Najib Razak assured young voters of a better quality of life under the Barisan Nasional government. They were also promised that the BN government would meet their aspirations for advancement.

"Tomorrow will be much better than today. We have proved that we can deliver," said the prime minister.

His assurance came without a second thought when a netizen, who went by the name Dr Kamal, asked during the NSTLive online chat what guarantee the prime minister could give to young voters if they voted BN in the coming general election.

Najib interacted with 1,500 people during the session that helped him reach out to the masses, especially young people who are more at home with information and communications technology.

The question was pertinent since youth are becoming the dominant political force in the country. It is estimated that young people will account for 80 per cent, or almost three million, of new voters. Their proportion of votes is expected to go up to 49 per cent in the next general election, from 41 per cent in 2008.

The prime minister has linked up with the young on Facebook and Twitter, besides appearing at youth activities and local radio talk shows. He has the largest following in the country on Facebook and Twitter, and his branding on radio, television and mainstream newspapers has been positive.

Najib's sincerity in reaching out also saw the birth of the Najib Razak Club, or NRC11, a year ago. Activities include gotong-royong. In February, young members of the club had a teh tarik session with comedian and actor Afdlin Shauki. Other personalities and politicians have been featured as speakers in the club's nation-building programmes. The latest of these was D. Ravindran, director of the National Key Results Areas on Corruption, on May 23.

The engagement with young people sends the message that Najib regards them as partners and future leaders in nation-building.

Rarely has a head of government reached out like this. It has enhanced the programmes of BN Youth and the component party youth wings.

The recent BN Youth Job Fair was a hit. Its "Orang Muda Pilih BN" programme in several states elicited a big response, firing up young supporters to campaign for the coalition. The latest in Jitra, Kedah, this month attracted more than 10,000 young men and women; as many attended the one held in Ipoh last month.

Across the divide, opposition leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim also maintains an active presence in social media. He is also aware of Malaysia's low median age and is pushing hard to capture the affections of the under-30 voting bloc.

He is joined by information technology-savvy opposition leaders and supporters, who, along with sympathetic non-governmental organisations, are aggressively fishing for young voters via the Internet.

BN has poured a lot of resources to overcome the opposition advantage in winning the acceptance and support of the youth.

Najib has been making inroads into this crucial voter segment, which swung in favour of candidates representing Pas, DAP and Parti Keadilan Rakyat in the 2008 general election.

The ruling coalition is playing up not only its long history of political and economic stability but also Najib's transformational reform agenda.

The opposition pact, by contrast, continues to peddle vague promises, which even their own leaders are uncertain can all be fulfilled.

But the governing parties need to look beyond racial politics. Young people generally have more liberal views of democracy than their elders.

The young, who were mostly fence-sitters in 2008, see the opposition as aligning itself with groups that claim to be fighting for universal concerns such as corruption and good governance that they profess to be committed to.

Those from the middle class also do not have the same interests as the poor, for whose benefit broad policies are in place.

Young voters, especially the first-timers, are becoming increasingly politicised. BN leaders recognise how this can often make them vulnerable to the opposition's blandishments.

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