

Young fence-sitters, women key to victory in next elections
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KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 24 — More than one in 10 voters in the next general election will be first timers and how they lean will likely determine who takes Putrajaya, with Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Rakyat (PR) already locked in what is seen as the most keen tussle for support in the country's recent history.

Political analysts and observers say the fence-sitters — especially women working at home and the young — will be crucial in determining the results of the elections that must be called by next April.

"They (fence-sitters) will determine who will win or lose partly because a large number of seats (in the last elections) were won with a small margin of seats," said Merdeka Center's Ibrahim Suffian.

Until the end of last year, the number of eligible voters had grown from 10.9 million during Election 2008 to 12.2 million Malaysians, an increase of 1.3 million.

That figure will rise further if elections are delayed to next year.

On Wednesday, the DAP appeared to be the first to seize on the significance of new voters when it launched a new nationwide voter registration drive.

The DAP said it would make a last-ditch effort to register more new voters in an effort to overcome the slim advantage in popular votes BN won over PR parties in Election 2008.

BN secured 4.08 million votes in 2008 compared to PR's 3.79 million — a difference of fewer than 290,000 votes — and the federal opposition hopes new voters in the next election can help tilt the balance towards the PR parties of the DAP, PAS and PKR.

The DAP said the nationwide voter registration campaign will start before September 15, on the expectation that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak will call for the general election in January.

According to the Election Commission (EC), there are still 3.3 million unregistered voters.

Ibrahim from the Merdeka Center said of the new voters, the two main groups of fence-sitters are the young and women working at home.

"Undecided voters tend to be either very well-informed or people who are least informed," he told The Malaysian Insider recently.

He said the well-informed are "sceptical" about BN, but also "have strong reservations" on PR.

At the other end, Ibrahim said that "women who are not in the workforce... tend to be less exposed to political development or rather (get a) one-sided point of view... hard to get alternative information."

He said fence-sitters will be more important in semi-urban or rural areas, as most city dwellers have already opted to support PR.

Saying that the economy will remain Malaysia's main concern, Ibrahim said other factors that could sway voters are candidate choices and the conduct of the election campaign.

Anuar Mohd Nor, executive director of Institut Asas Kajian Kemasyarakatan (INSKA), shared Ibrahim's views that "it is crucial for both sides to acknowledge fence-sitters."

"Both BN and PR are concentrating on fence-sitters especially the young voters," Anuar said, saying that their campaign methods had changed.

He noted that both sides have tailored their campaign to cater to the "new generation", including extensive use of the Internet and through music.

Asked if BN's recent efforts would affect young voters, he pointed out that "every good deed has an expiry date" as people would forget what measures were taken.

He said they will instead decide "on current issues especially when it touches on their daily lives" even as close as two weeks before the polls date.

But Anuar said both sides have to "work through policies now" and not give solutions only when elections draw near, citing BN's Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia (BR1M) scheme where a one-off payment of RM500 each was given to low-income households.

Both analysts agree that issues of "corruption and integrity" will swing votes among the young electorate, with Anuar pointing to exposes of scandals by BN and PR.

The Najib administration had targeted the youth by organising the One Million Youth Gathering in Putrajaya in May and recently launching the volunteer programme 1 Malaysia Youths For You (1M4U).

BN had also aggressively increased its cyberspace activity with more pro-BN news portals and a rising number of supporters taking to Twitter.

Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's online presence is far behind Najib, with his Facebook account recording less "likes" and a smaller following for his Twitter account.

In a bid to woo Internet-savvy young voters, Anwar hosted a live chat on Google Hangout recently, in a first for politicians in Malaysia.

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