

Umno at risk of ceding women's vote
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KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 26 — Women have traditionally been an important demographic for Umno with the party's Wanita wing seen as the Barisan Nasional (BN) lynchpin's backbone in ensuring solid votes from housewives and mothers, but there are now growing concerns that they are being ignored in favour of the youth vote.

"There is a need for Wanita Umno to go back and use the old system of heading down to their constituencies and going door to door. This is very important.

"When we used to do this, we would only see a small margin of error in election results versus our predictions, a minor difference of 100 or 200 votes," Datuk Faridah Abu Hassan, Umno Cheras Wanita division chief, told The Malaysian Insider.

She said the women's wing appeared to have eschewed the traditional campaign methods that had worked so well for the party previously.

"They prefer using online media and hosting programmes (sic) (with) large attendances of 10,000 to 30,000 people, but have nothing to show for it during the elections, as what happened in 2008," she said.

Both the youth and women have been identified by political observers and analysts as key to determining who takes Putrajaya, with 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 have told The Malaysian Insider that 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.

"Women are very important as they make up half the electorate and they vote principally on issues and established experience," Ibrahim Suffian from the Merdeka Center told The Malaysian Insider yesterday.

"They tend to be more focused on the deliverables that the political parties can offer and tend to be more pragmatic as well."

Wan Saiful Wan Jan from the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS) said that how women tended to vote was difficult to determine, suggesting that they made up a significant number of fence-sitters considered key to victory when polls are called.

"Their votes have historically been very important, especially at the last minute," he said. "They keep their votes to themselves right to the very end, thus it is not easy to determine who they will vote for, which is why both PAS and Umno will continue their campaigns right to the end," he said.

Wanita Umno and Puteri Umno grassroots leaders The Malaysian Insider spoke to this week pointed out that that the female demographic was more interested in bread and butter issues affecting the family, such as the rising cost of living, healthcare and urban poverty.

But they admitted that the old personal-touch of campaigning by going door-to-door had been largely replaced by mass gatherings where cash handouts are given to underprivileged families.

“Young Malay women voters make 13 to 15 per cent of the voters for Hulu Selangor, and the issue, specifically in Hulu Bernam, is the issue of living costs,” said Zahana Hamzah, Puteri Umno chief in Hulu Selangor.

Suhaila Md Zin, Head of Communications for Puteri Umno Selangor added that other than the need to tighten wallets due to high living costs, younger housewives were facing issues with regards to childcare. “Young mothers nowadays quit their jobs because there is nobody to care for their kids at home.” She was among the few leaders The Malaysian Insider spoke to who pointed out the importance of going door-to-door. “We still have to win over their hearts after they’ve read blogs and listened to rumours.”

Both BN and PR have been turning their attention to the economy, with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak expected to announce a fresh round of handouts under the Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia (BR1M) initiative.

PR has also promised to lower taxes on cars in a bid to increase household disposable income. The economy grew at a surprising pace of 5.4 per cent in the second quarter, blowing away economists’ expectations and potentially giving rise to a feel-good factor ahead of the general election.

But the good news is not expected to last as the global outlook is likely to affect Malaysian exports. Malaysia’s surprisingly strong second-quarter economic growth despite weakening exports was largely due to the buffer of ongoing construction projects and increased spending attributed to civil servant salary hikes and government cash handouts, say economists, which could point to uneven growth in the months ahead.

This means many ordinary Malaysians are not feeling the positive effects of economic growth, making the second BR1M handouts necessary to continue maintaining any economic momentum. With rising cost of living a major focus for women, both BN and PR will have their work cut out in winning over the crucial votes needed to take Putrajaya.

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