

GE13 bellwether on Malaysia's racial economic policy
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KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 12 – Malaysia's looming elections is a power struggle between two regimes that will determine if the mainly Muslim country makes the leap forward into high-income nationhood or stumbles under the twin yokes of religion and economic disparity, an opinion piece in Singapore's Straits Times said today.

In the article, the writer observed that the 13th general elections will mark the turning point for Southeast Asia's third-biggest economy regardless which political pact takes Putrajaya as both the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) and fledgling Pakatan Rakyat (PR) are held down economically by racial and religious shackles of their own making.

"The coming general election in Malaysia will show how the chips fall if the status quo continues – or change comes," said Derwin Pereira, a former journalist with the Singapore daily in an article published today and titled "Moving beyond race in Malaysian electoral politics".

Pereira, who now heads a Singapore-based political consulting firm, noted that while race remains a hair-trigger subject in multicultural Malaysia, other factors have come into play – notably the increasing income disparity and uneasiness over enforcement of Islamic laws on the 40 per cent non-Muslim population.

Income inequality has created a two-class system within the Malay community, he said, putting the well-connected rich at the top and making bottom feeders of the poor despite race-based affirmative action policies.

He added that the indigenous community in Borneo Malaysia, many of whom are Christian, are increasingly put off by a growing wave of Islamisation within the BN due to the coalition's Malay mainstay, Umno's overtures to woo support from the Muslim ground.

Malaysia's supreme law dictates that Malays must be Muslims, thereby making race and religion inseparable and hot button topics in the country.

"The ethnic and economic alienation of these Malay, Chinese and Indian Malaysians from BN in varying measures has boosted PR's claims to be a viable multiracial alternative to the ruling coalition.

"To put it another way, PR has encroached into the middle ground of Malaysian politics, which was a BN preserve till recently," the writer said.

Pereira said while Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib had the personal backing of the majority of the 28 million electorate based on the results of pre-polls surveys conducted this year, he has been unable to push through difficult but necessary reforms to keep the country's economy growing at more than five per cent a year.

But the BN's problems do not mean its political foes are sailing on smooth seas in the run-up to polls, he said.

"At the heart of its troubles lies PAS. Its agenda, which is tied to syariah Islamic law, alienates the non-Muslim religious minorities deeply," Pereira said.

He described the Islamist party's emphasis on religion over race as a double-edge sword for the opposition pact.

"But when the two overlap completely, as they do in the case of Malays, it is difficult to see how PAS can remain neutral if a reformist PR government chips away at Malay economic privileges in pursuit of a truly post-NEP Malaysia that creates opportunities and distributes rewards on the basis of merit," he said.

PR will have to answer serious questions on the issue and overcome them if it succeeds in taking Putrajaya, he said.

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