

On the May 5 polls, even families pull apart
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Second in The Malaysian Insider series on the challenges to national reconciliation after GE13, a look at two families strained by the political divide.

One husband was nagged by his Wanita Umno wife to haul down his opposition party flag from the front gate of their home. He took it down all right and even put up a Barisan Nasional flag – on the rabbit cage at the back of their house. Their political feud continues.

A husband in another family conspired with his children not to take their mother to the polling station on May 5 because they were sure she was going to vote for the government.

"My father, who even accompanies her to the market, was happy to hang her out to dry this time," said the daughter. But they later found out that she made it there anyway with her tai chi friends.

"My father has stopped driving her to the market," the daughter said.

This is life in some Malaysian families weeks before and after the recent general elections. Is national reconciliation possible when even families are split down the middle? What will it take for the spirit of family to exorcise the ghost of GE13?

Maya doesn't know. The daughter of the Wanita Umno mum said: "My abah would constantly irritate my mother by telling her that the government was corrupted and running the country badly. My mum would retort: BRIM ambil, pinjaman Tekun pun ambil, lepas itu kutuk kerajaan" (Take the BRIM, Tekun loan and abuse the government).

Her parents, Kamal, 69, and his wife, Sharifah, 67, practically lived separate lives in a comfortable suburb in the city before the recent polls.

While Kamal is a staunch PAS supporter, his Wanita Umno wife goes on trips with her lady friends to attend functions and do community work for the party.

Watching both her retired parents, their youngest daughter Maya, 26, said she was amazed to see her parents on opposite sides of the political divide.

Closer to the elections, the arguments intensified, Maya said.

"They spent a lot of time attending political gatherings. They were hardly at home.

"And when they came back, my father would visit YouTube and look for videos posted by the opposition."

Because of her feuding parents, Maya was determined not to tell her parents which side she was on.

"My dad accused me of being a BN supporter like my mother. I just smiled," she said.

"On polling day, the unimaginable happened. The indelible ink on my father's finger came off easily and he went into a tirade against the EC and insisted on lodging a police report.

"My mother and I had to calm him down. We showed him our fingers. The ink did not come off. He only relented when he tried, unsuccessfully to remove the ink from our fingers."

After the elections, however, Kamal cried election fraud while Sharifah was preparing to receive her Tekun loan to set up a sundry shop near her home.

"My parents are still close to each other, but emotions will flare up again when politics is discussed at home. That, I am sure of," Maya added.

As for the couple that no longer markets together, Sebastian, 75, is always at odds with his wife, Diana, when it comes to politics. Both are immigrants from India. They became citizens and raised four children here.

"We grew up with very little money. Times were hard as my father was the sole breadwinner. My mum could not find a job with her Indian degree as she could not speak Bahasa Malaysia.

"Still, she always felt a sense of gratitude to the country while my father harboured ill feelings towards the government for not doing enough for our clan. He supported DAP as the party that championed the rights of people like him," said their son, Arnold.

Arnold complained that he and his younger sister were denied scholarships to further their studies despite obtaining good grades.

"Eventually, it was the government of Singapore that came to our aid and that made my father even more angry at the government.

"It also made me sad, having to live away from my family from the age of 17."

In the run up to the recent polls, Arnold and two of his siblings decided to return home to vote in Ipoh Barat, for the first time.

"That was when we found out from my dad that my mother, he suspected, had been a Barisan Nasional supporter.

"My sisters and I could not accept this and asked her why. She chose the most obvious reason.

"Which government will simply give people money?" she said, referring to BR1M.

"We were shocked at this, and even joked about locking her up at home on polling day.

My dad then said: "I don't know why your mother is so ignorant."

Arnold and his sisters got into Ipoh the night before polling day and were too tired to try and change their mother's mind.

"So we did the next best thing. We decided not to help her out at the polling centre. With her limited knowledge of Bahasa Malaysia, and being 65 years old, she lacks confidence when it comes to matters like this, in particular when she has to communicate on official

matters.

"So we plotted to go to the voting centre, without her."

But, according to Arnold, his mother still went to the voting centre, with her tai chi friends.

Later when they asked her who she voted for, she retorted: "Undi itu rahsia" (The vote is a secret).

That night, when the results came in, we were upset that Pakatan Rakyat lost Perak.

"I lashed out at my mum, 'See, because of your vote, Barisan won'. She just walked away into her room.

"Although until today, my mother has not divulged who she voted for, we can make an educated guess when she later told us, 'I've earned my next BR1M handout'.

"Meanwhile, my father has stopped driving her to the market."

Just two families, but one same story. In some parts of life, it's a Malaysia people do not recognise any more. – July 3, 2013.

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