

A year after GE13, Malaysia remains in a political rut
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The atmosphere a year after GE13 has remained pretty much the same as before the general election, say analysts. As the country marks one year after arguably the most fiercely fought general election, The Malaysian Insider takes a step back to look at how the country has come since then. In this first part, we look at what has changed since then and if we are better off under the second Barisan Nasional administration of Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

One year after winning an even smaller majority and his first personal mandate, Datuk Seri Najib Razak and his Barisan Nasional (BN) find themselves in the same position as before GE13 – running a country divided by race and religion, and a majority dissatisfied with the ruling government.

Islamic fundamentalists want the Shariah criminal law, hudud, which prescribes amputation for theft; racial friction remains as right-wing groups stoke issues; inflation spiked to 3.5% in March; while three out of five people surveyed are against a 6% consumption tax due April 2015.

Loss-making flag carrier Malaysia Airlines has mysteriously lost a Boeing 777-200ER with 239 on board without any trace after a hunt that now enters its 57th day after days of confusion over its location. It has yet to be found.

Political scientist Dr Wong Chin Huat has described the atmosphere of the past year after the May 5 general elections as being the same as the first four years when Najib took over in 2009 from predecessor Tun Abdullah Badawi who quit over BN's historic loss of the two-thirds parliamentary super-majority in Election 2008.

“The Najib government in the year after May 5 is characterised by both active suppression of dissents and minorities and passive failure in governance.

“(This is) represented by the persecution of Pakatan Rakyat (PR) leaders and marginalisation of non-Muslims, and its failure in managing the MH370 crisis,” Wong told The Malaysian Insider.

The academic with the Penang Institute was referring to a sodomy conviction for opposition leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and a sedition conviction for the late Karpal Singh, the prominent lawyer and former DAP national chairman, last month.

Wong said that work to check PR's influence is still being done through the courts and allied NGOs in Najib's second term of power, after his four years were marked by various transformation programmes under the 1Malaysia banner that failed to capture the electorate's support.

Analysts said the BN government was seen to be slow in responding to increased tensions between ethnic and religious communities. It was also losing support as the pain of inflation bites deeper.

PR, which organised an anti-Goods and Services Tax (GST) rally on May 1 during the Labour Day public holiday hoped, just like it did four years ago, to create a wave of public anger towards pricier goods and services.

This climate, said Associate Professor Dr Shaharuddin Badaruddin of UiTM, reflected an unhealthy winner-takes-all political structure, where political players constantly have to unseat the other guy.

A healthy democracy has competing forces and ideologies. But a winner-takes-all culture drives political players to tear down some of the things that make a democracy healthy, the analysts said.

The numbers do not look good

Recent polling data from respected pollster Merdeka Center seemed to reflect a general unhappiness about the direction of the country and how it is being managed by the government.

In an opinion survey in March 2014, 49% of those polled felt the country was headed in the wrong direction. This is the highest its ever been in all of the center's survey dating back to 2008.

Only 38% felt that the country was headed in the right direction. This too is the lowest it's ever been.

The survey polled 1,005 voters over 21 years old in Peninsular Malaysia across ethnicity, gender, age and locality.

More than half of those polled were also unhappy with the government. A total of 41% said they were dissatisfied and 7% said they were angry.

In comparison, 42% said they were happy with the government.

When it came to their feelings about BN, the sentiment was even worse. At least 52% were not happy with the BN, where 42% expressed dissatisfaction and 10% were angry.

Of those polled, 38% said they were happy with the BN.

Insecure governance

Wong said that much of the political strife was because of feelings of insecurity on the part of the BN after it only won 47% of the popular vote last May 5.

Analysts have in the past shown that had Malaysia's constituencies been more equal in terms of voter population, the current government would be reflected by the amount of votes each coalition received.

Also, said Shahrudin, the GE13 results entrenched an urban-rural gap in terms of political loyalties. PR had won mostly urban, more populous seats while BN garnered mostly rural support.

"This tug of war continues just like the previous four years. Pakatan tries to increase rural votes and BN tries to go for urban votes," said Shahrudin, who is attached to UiTM's administrative science and policy studies faculty.

To cement its power, said Wong, the BN administration was using a two-pronged strategy. First, it is going after its critics in Pakatan and NGOs by hauling them to court, mostly through the Peaceful Assembly Act 2012, he said.

Playing defence, provoking offence

In fact, the BN administration seemed to be leading defensively after a slew of unpopular policies.

It backtracked on some of its promises such as getting rid of preventive detention. It repealed the Internal Security Act and removed the Emergency Ordinance in 2012.

But it passed the Prevention of Crime Act 2013, which also provides for preventive detention.

After it cut fuel subsidies and allowed Tenaga Nasional Berhad to raise electricity prices, the administration has been on the back foot.

Najib's own attempts to defuse anger over rising food prices were turned on its head and caricatured in the now infamous kangkung meme.

This has led PR leaders and civil society groups to believe that the racist flare-ups against DAP leaders and the raid on The Bible Society Of Malaysia (BSM) in January were to divert attention from cost of living issues.

The day before the raid, the youth-led Turun movement, which PR supported, had mounted a peaceful 10,000-person strong rally that took over the traditional New Year's celebration at Dataran Merdeka.

Strike breeds fear, fear breeds mediocrity

Wong believed that this was the second prong of the BN administration strategy to contain PR.

"Because it is surviving on a narrow base of 47%, the Najib government has resorted to playing up Malay-Muslim sense of insecurity and of being under-siege to consolidate its support.

"Under Najib, the country is on auto-pilot while the ultra-right Malay-Muslim nationalists like Isma and Perkasa hijack our attention," he added.

Shaharuddin believed the continued use of racism in pursuit of political support is holding Malaysia back from developing into a mature democracy.

That immaturity would eventually drag the country down, the analysts said, and added that when institutions were used for partisan reasons, they lose their ability to act impartially and equally towards every citizen.

Case in point, the police who, under the BN administration, were mysteriously unwilling to go after the Malay extremists who threatened Seputeh MP Teresa Kok, while Kok herself was probed for sedition for poking fun at the government through a satirical video, they said.

The politics of fear and intimidation through racist threats act as a curb on freedom of expression, the analyst said.

And lesser freedoms dampen the individual's ability to innovate and be creative, which is the software that powers dynamic economies, said Shaharuddin.

"Don't be surprised, by 2025, Indonesia's economy would probably overtake ours because of their political maturity," he added. – May 3, 2014.