

## **What Malaysians have endured a year after GE13**

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As the first anniversary of the 13<sup>th</sup> general election approaches, The Malaysian Insider looks at some of the hot-button issues plaguing the country.

The prime minister's attempt to respond to rising anger over higher prices using kangkung (water spinach) as an example earned him nothing but scorn. The 13th general election, it seems, was not the conclusive end to the five-year tug of war between the political forces shaping this country.

The 365 days since then seem to repeat the same cycle of conflict and tension that were constant features in the country between 2008 and 2013.

Fatal accidents, such as the Genting bus crash in July 2013 and the disappearance of MH370, have left Malaysians wondering how these incidents could still happen in this day and age.

As Malaysians attempt to speculate on whether things will get better on the road to developed-nation status, it would be helpful to review some of the things that have occurred since May 5, 2013.

### **GST**

In the Budget 2013, Putrajaya passed an act which will put the Goods and Services Act (GST) into effect in April 2015.

The tax has been fixed at 6% and will replace the current sales tax and service tax (SST).

### **Prevention of Crime Act**

Passed by Parliament last October. This reintroduced preventive detention. It was billed as Barisan Nasional's attempt at combatting the worsening crime rate after Emergency Ordinance was lifted, releasing thousands of criminals.

However, Pakatan Rakyat and human rights activists fear it would be one day used against critics of the government much in the same way the

Internal Security Act was used against DAP, PAS leaders and civil society activists in Ops Lalang 1987 and reformasi activists in 2000.

### **Fuel and electricity prices go up, and inflation follows**

Billed as part of efforts to reduce government debt, the BN administration cut subsidies for fuel causing RON 95 petrol to go up by 20 sen to RM 2.10 a litre on September 2. RON 97 petrol went up by 15 sen.

The move was part of the administration's efforts to reduce the national debt and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak had said then the new prices would save the government at least RM1.1 billion in 2013.

The sugar subsidy of 34 sen was abolished on October 26.

Electricity rates also went up by 15% starting this year. The hike hit mainly commercial users such as businesses and factories.

These combined increases have driven up the prices of goods and services.

Figures released by the Statistics Department in March showed that the cost of living, as measured through the consumer price index (CPI), has gone up to 3.5% last month.

It was 3.4% in January and 3.2% in December.

### **BR1M**

Putrajaya said that savings made through slashing subsidies would be channelled back into handouts for the poor through its 1Malaysia People's Aid (BR1M) programme.

Cash handouts to households with a monthly income of below RM3,000 have been increased to RM650 from RM500.

For those aged 21 and above and with a monthly income not exceeding RM2,000, BR1M was increased to RM300 from RM250.

For the first time, cash assistance of RM450 was extended to households with a monthly income of between RM3,000 and RM4,000.

The government set aside RM4.6 billion for all these schemes which benefited 7.9 million recipients.

### **The price of kangkung and of dissent**

Najib attempted to respond to rising anger over higher prices with a now infamous speech on how prices fluctuate. As an example, he chose kangkung (water spinach).

Like its fast-growing namesake, it became a meme that spread through the Internet and social media by inventive graphic artists.

Public humour over the phenomenon turned to anxiety when Umno supporters and its Malay supremacist allies threatened to trigger another "May 13" against those who continued to make fun of the prime minister.

This happened after Machang Bubuk assemblyman Lee Khai Loon organised a flash mob in Seberang Prai, Penang. As part of its gimmick, Lee fed kangkung into a large cardboard caricature of Najib.

Umno's response was to mount a counter-protest. Protesters marched to Lee's office, shouting vulgarities and threatening another racial riot. They also torched a mannequin bearing Lee's photo.

The racial nature of the protest would be repeated again by another Malay supremacist group against Pakatan Rakyat MP Teresa Kok in February.

On the pretext of protesting against Kok's Chinese New Year video, in which she poked fun at government officials, a Malay supremacist group gathered in Dang Wangi, Kuala Lumpur, to slaughter two chickens. They then smeared the blood on a poster with photographs of DAP leaders.

The group offered a RM2,000 reward to anyone who would slap Kok.

When asked, Home Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said police would not investigate the threat against Kok as "no crime was committed".

### **Fighting over God**

Tensions between Muslim and Christians continue to rise. Churches have again been attacked as the country tries to find a way out of the tussle over who gets to use the term "Allah".

In October, the Court of Appeal ruled that the Home Ministry was right in banning a Catholic weekly from using the word "Allah".

Christian leaders, however, responded by saying they would continue to use the term during services.

Worries mounted during Christmas when Muslim extremist groups threatened to protest outside churches. Those plans were aborted after police issued stern warnings.

Tensions flared again on the second day of the new year when the Selangor Islamic Religious Department (Jais) confiscated 321 Bibles in Bahasa Malaysia and Iban from the Bible Society of Malaysia.

The same month, three churches in Penang had provocative banners strung up outside their compounds by unknown parties.

A day later, two assailants threw fire bombs into the Church of the Assumption in George Town, Penang. One landed on the grass in front of the church but did not explode. The other damaged part of the floor of its front yard shrine.

Until today, no one has been charged in the attacks.

### **MH370 disappears**

A Beijing-bound Malaysian Airlines plane MH370 disappears an hour after take-off from Kuala Lumpur in the early morning hours of March 8.

Close to a dozen countries searched the South China Sea in Vietnamese waters for about nine days before authorities realised that the plane had turned back and headed towards the Indian Ocean.

As the search in the southern part of the ocean turns up nothing, Malaysian authorities are accused by the victims' families of lacking transparency about what they knew about the plane's disappearance.

### **Water crisis hits Selangor**

Blaming unusually dry weather, the Selangor government together with water distributor Syabas and federal regulator SPAN started rationing treated water to about two million homes in February.

The two days on, two days off, water rationing schedule was meant to prevent the state from sucking the Sungai Selangor dam dry.

Selangor's more than 30 treatment plants were forced to get raw water from the dam after the weather dried up rivers, which are the main sources of raw water. – May 3, 2014.

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