

Race, religious issues still dominate a year after GE13
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In our series to mark the anniversary of the most heated general election in recent memory, The Malaysian Insider takes stock of the issues still dominating the national discourse.

For a time after Datuk Seri Najib Razak took over as prime minister in 2009, the focus was on national unity and the economy which was best summed up by his 1Malaysia concept.

Today, one year after winning his first personal mandate, it would appear that the country is still in a drift with the sense that no one is at the controls in Putrajaya and the 1Malaysia concept just a footnote in history.

Najib, Umno and the Barisan Nasional (BN) are still in the doldrums, after winning fewer seats than his much-maligned predecessor Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who lost the ruling coalition's traditional two-thirds parliamentary super-majority in the 2008 elections.

And there is still no end in sight to race and religious issues and the education malaise afflicting Malaysia. The opposition pact, Pakatan Rakyat (PR), is also fraying at the seams over the issue of hudud or Islamic criminal laws.

PAS wants to push two private members' bills on hudud laws in Kelantan, which is being encouraged by Umno and several Malay Muslim groups, to the dismay of its ally DAP while the other PR ally, PKR, dithers over an appropriate response.

Despite a 10-point plan to respect religious freedom in 2011, the BN government, through the Attorney-General, is still appealing against the right of non-Muslims to use Arabic words such as Allah while Malay and Iban language Bibles risk being confiscated under religious laws meant to deter proselytisation.

Right-wing groups like Perkasa and Isma are using these issues to push their line that Malaysia must always be run by Malay Muslims and not the rest of the races that make up the country's 30 million population.

The Najib administration has been silent on these calls before and after GE13, where it even fielded then Perkasa vice-president Datuk Zulkifli Noordin as a candidate.

It has also funded Perkasa and Isma's activities despite their pronouncements running contrary to Najib's push for unity under 1Malaysia and a national reconciliation plan that has yet to be revealed.

"Race and religion are dominant issues because it is easier to use them rather than working hard on other initiatives such as the economy or transparency," a BN politician who declined to be named told The Malaysian Insider.

He noted that Umno knew that such issues will split the opposition just like the break-up of Barisan Alternatif in 2011 when the DAP quit after PAS insisted on enforcing religious laws in Terengganu.

"PAS is torn over hudud, and that is also tearing apart PR," he added.

Critics also point out that the handling of the lost flight MH370 is a microcosm of what is wrong with the country.

The initial chaotic response to the missing Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777-200ER with 239 people on board, the need for approval from the prime minister to start searching in the west coast or to issue reports, and the secrecy over details of the plane and investigations speak volumes of the inept and incompetent politicians and public officials running the administration.

"Our top civil servants are just that, servants. They are indecisive or wait for the politicians to decide for them, at the expense of time and money," a political analyst said.

"If you can't rely on the politicians for leadership and you can't rely on the civil servants for certainty in carrying out their duties, who can you rely on? Is it a wonder the country seems to be in a rut?" the BN politician asked.

Civil rights groups and academics say Malaysia must go beyond issues of race and religion in the country of 30 million people.

"History never moves in a straight line. I am optimistic that this madness will not last. Whether or not it will sadly take an explosion for us to learn, I don't know, but it will pass," constitutional expert Emeritus Professor Datuk Dr Shad Saleem Faruq said recently, citing a revamp to the education system and criminalising hate speeches as suggestions to restore unity.

But with the hudud and the Allah issues still being played out in political and legal circles, race and religion will still dominate the national discourse among the two coalitions wrestling for Malaysia in the next general election.
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