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MCA's Battle Cry: Without Fear or Wisdom?

By Choong Pui Yee

Synopsis

The Malaysian Chinese Association's cry of "Battle Without Fear" for the coming elections is aimed at the opposition and focuses on cultural issues. It may not meet the aspirations of the younger Malaysian electorate who want action on broader issues of equal opportunity and good governance.

Commentary

THE MALAYSIAN Chinese Association (MCA), a component party of the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition, adopted at its recent general assembly the slogan "Battle Without Fear" for the coming general election. Its president, Chua Soi Lek, attacked the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance) on the issues of hudud (Islamic criminal law), unfulfilled promises and neglect of Chinese education, and warned that chaos would ensue if the opposition coalition were to take over the federal government.

The MCA assembly however was short on ideas on how to win back the support of the Chinese community which it had lost in successive elections. It only won 15 parliamentary seats and 31 state assembly seats in the 2008 elections, losing most of its former seats in the cities and towns of peninsular Malaysia.

Lack of broader issues

To stay relevant the MCA has to be able to grasp the aspirations of the Chinese electorate, which is polarised. While some sections of the Chinese community still feel very strongly about cultural concerns, many are struggling with broader issues that range from bread and butter questions, equal opportunities to good governance. Cultural rights, though important, are not at the top of the agenda of the Chinese electorate, especially the younger anglophile generation.

In his presidential speech Chua defended the past record of MCA in keeping alive Chinese education and providing affordable tertiary education to Chinese Malaysians by establishing a college and a university. But this success pales in comparison to its failure to advocate broader issues such as equality, anti-corruption and good governance.

While recycling its past track record to woo the electorate the party has failed to grasp the aspirations of the people. Instead Chua sought to frighten them by spinning the consequences of PAS' proposal to introduce

hudud laws, to the extent of suggesting that PAS leaders condoned rape against non-Muslim women. Pas Vice President, Salahudin Ayub has described such political jab as “hitting below the belt”.

Chua’s heroic call to battle got an enthusiastic response from the cadres at the assembly who donned blue shirts with anti-opposition slogans, such as “Say No to PAS Hudud”. While that may have shored up their camaraderie against the opposition they would also be seen to signify their close support for the BN, with its blue emblem.

Generational shift

Such warnings however would not impress the younger Chinese Malaysians who do not have the baggage of their forebears with their immigrant identity. Instead they feel they are truly Malaysian and want to be treated not as Chinese but as Malaysian. It is politically retrogressive for MCA to harp on its Chinese education success to woo the electorate. One of the reasons why the Chinese community is more ready to abandon MCA is that it has had enough of MCA’s pretence of championing Chinese rights at the behest of UMNO, the dominant partner in the ruling coalition. The Chinese community is tired of mere words and the lack of action.

Additionally, if there is any lesson that MCA needs to remember, the political landscape in Malaysia has changed irrevocably since the 2008 general election. That election dispelled the myth of an invincible Barisan Nasional and it was an election where Malaysians have come of age. Since then, Malaysians now have the luxury to dream of a different Malaysia, perhaps one that is not entirely entrenched on racial representatives but anchored on what is truly good for all the ‘rakyat’.

Therefore, the next general election will be a test for the MCA to stay relevant, whether or not the BN will have a two-thirds majority in Parliament. The MCA would need to overhaul itself to be ready to meet the aspirations of the electorate. MCA should be ready to do so if they were to “battle without fear”. Yet the political will remained questionable.

To be sure, its rhetorical call to battle will need to be backed by wisdom and sound policies that will resonate with the new generation of Chinese Malaysians. If the MCA assembly is anything to go by the party is still short of ideas and inspiration for the big battle in the next general election, which must be called by April 2013.

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