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The Youth Vote in GE 2013: Kingmakers in the Making?

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Synopsis

The youth vote will be among the key deciding factors in the 13th general election in Malaysia. How they vote will play a crucial part in defining the electoral outcome in the frontline states and shaping the nature of Malaysian politics.

Commentary

MALAYSIA'S 13th general election on 5 May 2013 is expected to be the closest-ever race since independence between the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN or National Front) and the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR or People's Alliance). A key group that is likely to have a significant influence on the outcome is the bloc of young voters who comprise 30% of the electorate.

The coalition that can garner the support of the youths is likely to make major gains in several frontline states and even form the next government in Putrajaya. In this respect, the young voters may well emerge as kingmakers in whose hands lie the future of Malaysian politics.

Importance of the youth vote

The contest for the youth vote can be better understood by analysing the breakdown of the Malaysian electorate according age. The Election Commission figures show that 70% of the 4.2 million unregistered voters are between the ages of 21 and 40. About 450,000 Malaysians turn 21 each year, the eligible voting age in the country. In 2008, the young voters played a crucial role in the vote swing towards the Opposition. The EC has registered 2.4 million new voters the past year or 30 % of the electorate.

A recent survey conducted by the University of Malaya Centre of Democracy and Election (UMCEDEL) showed 48% of first-time voters have yet to decide which party to vote for. Given that the survey showed a slim difference in support for the two coalitions (BN at 42% and PR at 37% respectively), the way these fence sitters vote will become crucial in determining the election outcome. This makes the youth vote even more important. Against this backdrop, both the BN and PR have stepped up their efforts to win over the youth vote..

The BN government has rolled out a series of populist measures aimed at garnering support from Malaysian youths. For instance in December 2012, the government provided a RM200 rebate for handphones costing less than RM500. More recently, the government engaged the popular Korean singer, Psy, to perform at the

Chinese New Year celebrations in the opposition-ruled state of Penang. BN leaders hoped that the craze for Korean pop stars amongst Malaysian youths could sway some towards voting for BN.

PR has also actively targeted young voters through a series of populist policies. Some of its plans include offering free education, slashing the prices of cars, implementing a higher minimum wage and moderating home prices. The fact that both BN and PR are beginning to field younger candidates further attests to the growing importance of the youth vote.

Malaysian youth and politics

A survey conducted by The Asia Foundation entitled National Youth Survey 2012 provides some interesting insights into the political thinking of youths in Malaysia. Many of the young are less likely to view politics from the religious and racial lens. More than 71% of the young voters indicated their preference for political parties that are multi-racial and hence represent the interests of all Malaysians regardless of ethnicity (race) or religion.

These youths are also likely to be more concerned with the general economic situation such as employment, inflation and the state of security. Most of the youths (about 60%) felt that the current government is relatively successful in addressing these concerns. However an increasing number of youths are also concerned about issues of corruption and cronyism.

Given the political attitudes and thinking of many Malaysian youths, several deductions can be made about their voting behaviour. Firstly, the PR's more multi-racial approach to politics is likely to resonate with youths. On the other hand the strategy employed by the dominant United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) to warn Malay voters of the impending 'threat' from the country's ethnic minority if the PR is to form the next government might actually backfire. This could, on the contrary, drive away the younger voters and translate into possible loss of votes in crucial parliamentary and state seats.

Secondly, the lack of significant success by the Malaysian government to eradicate corruption and cronyism within the political system is likely to cause the ruling coalition youth votes. Thirdly, some youths might still vote for the BN even if they are unhappy with some aspects of its governance due to the belief that the current government is still the best bet in ensuring the continued economic well-being and societal harmony the country has been enjoying.

Youths as kingmaker in the election

The youth vote is likely to be even more important in several hotly-contested areas. In frontline states such as Selangor, Kedah, Negri Sembilan and Perak that will be keenly contested, the youth vote will be crucial in determining the winner. In Selangor where BN has spared no effort to topple the PR-led state government, over 600,000 new voters have been registered. The way these voters (many of whom are presumably young) exercise their vote is likely to determine the winner. Similarly, in Negri Sembilan where PR needs just four seats to obtain a simple majority, the youth vote will be crucial.

While it is perhaps an exaggeration to argue that the youth vote alone could determine the outcome of the general election, BN risks losing power for the first time if a vast majority of the youths and Malaysian Chinese voters converge to vote opposition. As such, Malaysia's youth vote is becoming increasingly critical and could dictate the outcome of the elections. It is thus to be expected that politicians from both sides will be pushing hard for the crucial youth vote in the final stages of the election campaigns.

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