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BN-PR Manifesto War: Different Platforms, Same School

By Shamsul A.B.

Synopsis

The ruling Barisan Nasional coalition and the opposition Pakatan Rakyat have been engaged in a war of manifestos. While each side claims to offer better programmes and plans than the other, their leaders, Najib Razak and Anwar Ibrahim, come from the same school – the 'BN Political Academy'- and are essentially cut from the same cloth.

Commentary

OBSERVING MALAYSIAN politics is like watching Nicol David, the Malaysian who is seven times World Champion in Women's Squash, contesting the strategic 'T position' in the centre of court. The squash contest is usually focused, fast, furious and exciting.

In Malaysian politics, the contest for the T-position – is for dominance of 'the perception space'. This contest is generally slow and often unpredictable. But as in squash, it is also highly exciting; it involves the ruling coalition and its supporters, the opposition and its supporters, those sitting on the fence, as well as civil society and extremist groups.

BN 'Political Academy'

If we include the bloggers, we suddenly have a crowded T-position. Observing the antics and intrigues of those in the T-position in contemporary Malaysian politics is never boring because, since the last general election in 2008, everyone has an opinion and everyone is an analyst.

It also poses the question: in the end, to what extent does this excitement about Malaysian politics in general represent the momentous political struggle between two former UMNO Youth leaders - Anwar Ibrahim and Najib Tun Razak? Despite their rivalry, both share many things in common. Most importantly, both are alumni of the one and only Malaysian 'school of politics,' namely, the 'Barisan Nasional (BN) Political Academy.' Because they come from the same school, their opposing manifestos even look very similar – to the point of triggering mutual accusations of intellectual borrowing, or plagiarism.

Take, for example, the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) manifesto. Its supporters claim that the PR manifesto is original and fresh. If we compare it closely against previous manifestos of the Alliance or BN, it looks like a rehash of those old manifestos. What PR does is to promise to revamp or end those policies that it has criticised to be

flawed.

For instance, the National Automotive Policy (NAP) introduced by BN in 2006 has many shortcomings, so PR intends to correct the NAP should it capture Putrajaya. The feel-good promise for the middle class is that PR intends to reduce car prices if it wins this general election. It does not need a politics graduate from Oxford to come up with such an 'innovative' promise. One with a 'sekolah malam' (night school) qualification could suggest even better ideas based on his/her life experience.

On the other hand, if we look at BN's manifesto closely, it is basically a summary of the report card of the Government Transformation Programme (GTP) and the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) that Prime Minister Najib presented on 19 March 2013. Some are indeed very general, such as on macro-economic matters relating to investment and finance. But some are very specific, such as on the proposed increase in quantum of the government hand-out Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia (BR1M).

About three-quarters of BN's promises are actually a continuation of what the ruling coalition has already implemented. Only one-quarter listed in the manifesto comprises new projects, such as the proposed Kuala Lumpur-Singapore high-speed train.

In short, if we are to stick this list of BN promises on our wall till the next general election in 2018, we can literally tick YES and/or NO and evaluate whether BN has indeed fulfilled its promises made in this general election. This assessment can easily influence how voters should vote in the next general election five years from now.

Populist politics and policies

What is significant but unspoken in both manifestos is the fact that voters are still guided by populist politics and policies - in the way ideas and pronouncements are made about the state of Malaysia's progress and development. As voters have needs, wants and desires, the government has, since 1957, been doing everything it possibly could to fulfill all the basic needs - food, clothing and shelter - while increasing the level of income and reducing poverty.

Malaysia has now reduced the incidence of poverty from 50% to 5% in the last five decades. This is a remarkable achievement by any standard. In the new millennium there is a shift from simply fulfilling needs to achieving what the people want and what they desire.

The introduction of the concept of the 'bottom 40%' is about recognising simultaneously the social positions of the poor and the low-income group and addressing their socio-economic challenges. For this bottom 40%, the government's main task is to fulfil their needs and wants at the same time.

There is also the 'noisy, consumerist and self-centred' middle class, not to mention the wealthy who are comfortably enjoying all the subsidies while complaining that they are being taxed too much. Their wants and desires have to be fulfilled too.

Which is better?

Absent all the rhetoric and gutter politics, both the BN and PR manifestos fundamentally articulate the entrenched triangular nexus of needs-wants-desires that both Anwar and Najib are trying to address. In doing so, they try very hard to differentiate themselves. But they have not been successful because both have been schooled for decades in the same 'BN Political Academy.'

Even their political language and idioms are hard to separate, just like Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola. The real difference perhaps is the state of their respective coalitions or alliances. While the various ethnic parties that make up the components of BN are together in an arranged marriage, PR remains in a de facto marriage.

It will be up to the Malaysian voters in this crucial general election to distinguish between the two political groupings and decide which will be the preferred coalition to represent their aspirations for a better future.

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