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Malaysia's GE13: The Hustings Get Rough

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

As campaigning for Malaysia's general election on 5 May moves into its final stretch, all signs point to a close outcome. With the outbreak of sporadic electoral skirmishes, the political landscape continues to evolve.

Commentary

EXPECTATIONS THAT Malaysia's 13th general election on 5 May will be unusually hot - more so than 2008 - have so far been borne out. A letter from the Registrar of Societies casting doubt on the legality of the newly-elected leadership of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) - on the eve of Nomination Day - set the tone for the hustings: It galvanised further the three-party opposition alliance Pakatan Rakyat (PR) as an electoral force; the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) countered by casting its rival grouping as disparate, disunited and splintering – an image amplified in the pro-BN mainstream media.

While a record number of independents distanced themselves from both the BN and PR on Nomination Day, tensions rose between rival supporters as the campaigns got underway. The mainstream media reported clashes breaking out in different places which police described as "alarming". There have even been small, mysterious explosions at a BN rally that did little physical harm but were nevertheless unprecedented, and which police said was the work of "professionals".

Underlying tensions

The resort to explosives marked a new threshold in electoral skirmishes, yet it remains unclear who could be behind them as both sides of the political divide suggested some sort of conspiracy aimed at discrediting the other. Even as the dust was being raked up, a senior Customs official was murdered in cold-blood in the heart of the administrative capital Putrajaya on 26 April on his way to work. Police said the daylight killing was not related to the general election; the victim was known as "Mr Clean" for his tough stance on the underworld. However the shocking incident took place just a day before a major election rally in Putrajaya by PAS which is trying to capture the symbolically significant constituency for the opposition alliance's push to make inroads into BN territory and wrest power in this general election.

Both sides were, however, noticeably uncomfortable as they tried to contain the underlying tensions even as they deflected mutual political attacks during the campaigns. BN leader and Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak

said the resort to explosive devices would mar the elections while his deputy Muhyiddin Yassin said these incidents were out of character with the country's political culture. The opposition also condemned the explosions which they said were "clearly meant to create fear and provoke disorder".

The underlying tensions notwithstanding, the dominant mood during this campaign period has so far been one of normalcy and relative peace. People are still going about their daily lives as usual. Should this hold, the 5 May vote will go on as scheduled, with the security authorities ready to step in to maintain order should things get out of hand. Leaders on both sides know very well that political stability is paramount in a country which has experienced racial riots and emergency rule in the aftermath of the 1969 general election. In Johor PAS vice-president Salahuddin Ayub said May 13 will not happen again. Najib on the same day equated the "Johor Way" of moderation and accommodation with BN's formula for progress.

Irony of underlying tensions

But 2013 is not 1969. The irony is that the current electoral tensions are not really between the ethnic groups, although each community still harbours its own anxieties. Indeed, the electoral fights are largely over party beliefs and ideologies. The larger narrative emerging is the relative peace between the major ethnic communities beyond the BN-defined political template in which power is shared among the major races through the ruling coalition. This growing inter-ethnic accommodation beyond BN is giving life to the opposition coalition, while the space for inter-ethnic accommodation outside the formal political processes is actually widening rather than narrowing.

This is the sub-text of the growing cohesion amongst the three opposition allies in PR comprising Anwar Ibrahim's Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), DAP and PAS. The mainstream media however has been harping on their inherent ideological differences especially over Islamic law like *hudud*, giving the impression of a fundamentally split opposition. During the campaigns, however, the blurring of the divide continued: Mixed crowds of Chinese, Malays and Indians have been attending opposition rallies, reminiscent of 2008; youths from DAP, PKR and PAS cycled around in threes, carrying each other's symbols. While these images are part and parcel of the electoral power play, it also manifested the lowering of the ethnic and religious barriers outside the BN system.

As one retired UMNO divisional leader noted privately, what he observed is the growing sense of ease with each other amongst members of the three major communities – Malays, Chinese and Indians - who do not support the government. This, he says, is the positive effect of the emergent two-coalition system. Outwardly, the BN however appears to be more cohesive than the opposition; BN campaigns in a singular blue downplayed the coalition's reality of having many parties, contrasting sharply with the PR's three different flags of green (PAS), blue-red (PKR) and red-white (DAP).

Will the trend hold?

If this is the impact of the opposition alliance, the senior UMNO activist adds, then the birth of a two-coalition system will be good for the country. Inter-ethnic understanding will be enhanced on a larger template that is truly national – so long as Malay dominance is not under threat. When the DAP was told by the ROS that its leadership was not recognised following a controversial party election though it could still contest the national polls, the party was quick to say it would campaign under the PAS and PKR banners which the two allies were equally swift in accepting. PAS' spiritual leader Nik Aziz saw this as significant in terms of breaking down what he calls the wall of Islamophobia. Indeed both parties spoke of a new era in ties in which "the DAP rocket has landed on the PAS moon".

The remaining days of the campaigns are fraught with unpredictability as both sides ramp up their rallies. Critical will be the way things go in the frontline states especially Selangor, Johor, Kedah and Perak in the peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia. Surprises also cannot be ruled out. GE13 is indeed a crucial election to watch.

Prime Minister Najib expressed increasing confidence of winning back the two-thirds majority, which he described as critical for political and economic stability. Meanwhile PR is pulling in more crowd to its rallies. At opposition ceramahs, such as the one in Selangor this week, Anwar Ibrahim moved the listeners with the tagline: "*Ini Kali lah!*" (This is the time!). The mixed crowd of Malays, Chinese and Indians responded: "*Ubah!*" (Change!). By the evening of 5 May, we will know whether voters will follow him, or Najib.

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