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Malaysia's 13th General Election: Rising Citizen Participation

By Yeap Su Yin

Synopsis

Malaysia's much anticipated 13th general election saw a rise in citizen participation. This poses a new challenge for the country's political elite: how to respond to this change.

Commentary

WHILE MALAYSIA'S 13th general election saw an intense contest between the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) and the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) what is of equal significance has been the participation of ordinary citizens in the process. In the run-up to the elections, many have taken the initiative to be involved - in many different ways through different channels.

The numbers who turned out to vote on 5 May 2013 perhaps reflect this shift in political activism. According to the Election Commission, 85 per cent cast their votes for parliamentary seats while 86 per cent for the state legislative assembly seats. This was the highest number of votes cast in any general election in the country's history. Many researchers have referred to this as the "people's election".

A rapidly changing political landscape

While the country is seeing the beginnings of a new political environment the question remains: how should its political elite respond to such trends?

Recent global events from the Arab Spring to the Occupy Wall Street movement have given the world unexpected glimpses of the power of citizen participation; where demonstrating masses with the means of the Internet as a tool are able to play a significant part in the overthrow of long-standing regimes or in spreading the cause of a movement to many parts of the world.

While many have pointed to the increase in Internet connectivity as one of the main causes of these examples of citizen activism, opinion remains divided. Some analysts caution against reading too much into the effects of the Internet and social media in particular, citing the phenomenon of "clicktivism" as akin to being mere "armchair activists or politicians". They argue that social media provides the means for an easy response which does not translate to actual and substantial participation. However, others are more inclined towards the notion that the improvements in information and communication technologies have empowered the average citizen.

They note that the increase in Internet connectivity has reduced the cost of access to information and networking opportunities, paving the way to new heights in citizen participation. Whichever the case, it appeared that few governments caught up in the Arab Spring saw the signs of these changes and even fewer knew how to manage it effectively.

For Malaysia, an increasingly active citizenry has appeared in the country's political landscape. While the political parties battle it out in the traditional manner of campaign rallies, banners and speeches in mainstream media, the cyberspace was abuzz with Malaysians opining, promoting or assisting others in the run-up to the elections. What is noteworthy is the diverse ways in which citizens have chosen to play their parts in these elections.

Electoral reform campaigns helmed by the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections (Bersih) took on a global character with similar rallies and gatherings being carried out in a number of countries by many interested Malaysians. In the run-up to the elections, various online social initiatives sprung up to provide assistance such as transport arrangements for Malaysians who were planning to return and vote. For example, the Bersih Singapore group coordinated a carpool matching service for Malaysians returning from Singapore to vote. Another example is the "*Jom Balik Undi*" (Let's go back to vote') campaign started on Facebook, an initiative to encourage overseas Malaysians to return and vote.

Courting the active stakeholders

Apart from this, there are citizens who chose to participate in a more direct manner: many have spent their time training and volunteering as polling agents or as citizen election observers under initiatives run by a number of civil society groups such as the Merdeka Centre and Ideas.

The increasingly active political landscape has not escaped the attention of the country's political establishment. Many of the country's political parties and politicians have Facebook and twitter accounts, from the Prime Minister himself to prominent members of the opposition parties. While ordinary citizens can connect with politicians and receive updated news, whether this sufficiently engages today's politically active citizens is unclear. Why does this matter?

Social media analysts have predicted a worldwide trend emerging, leading to a time when almost everyone on earth will be connected through advancement in technology. This will bring about profound effects on many established concepts such as citizenship and governance, significantly reallocating the concentration of power from states and institutions to the people. In such a case, established institutions and hierarchies would have to learn to adapt or risk becoming obsolete.

Malaysia on the cusp of change

Malaysia's political landscape appears to be on the cusp of change: as the country's citizens become more technologically empowered to take action there is a need to rethink the ways in which to engage such communities. The means to do so look set to be the beginning of a journey in redefining the relationship between the country's political elite and its citizens.

At this juncture, two observations can be made. Firstly, the trend shows a level of participation that transcends just following tweets or updates. The underlying motivation appears to be one of active engagement, of a deeper and more committed involvement in issues that matter. Hence, new ways of engaging these citizens need to be considered.

Secondly but more importantly, channelling the commitment and energies of such groups should be seen to be beneficial to the nation as a whole. What is not helpful is to wrongly interpret such involvement as being in any way partisan or anti-establishment. This would just act to alienate genuine interest that would bring the country to higher levels of democratic maturity – in line with what may already be happening globally.

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