

The Upcoming Malaysian 13th General Election: A Critical Evaluation of Opportunities and Chances for the Contesting Political Parties in Malaysia

Mujibu Abd Muis
(Corresponding Author)

Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA Terengganu
Sura Hujung, 23000 Dungun, Terengganu
E-mail: mujibu@tganu.uitm.edu.my

Badrul Azmier

Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA Kedah
08400 Merbok, Kedah
E-mail: badmohamed@kedah.uitm.edu.my

Nur 'Ain Mohsin

Academy of Language Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA Melaka
KM 26, Jalan Lendu
78000 Alor Gajah, Melaka
E-mail: nurain615@melaka.uitm.edu.my

Nurul Saadatun Nadiah Mohd Ngah

Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA Terengganu
Sura Hujung, 23000 Dungun, Terengganu
E-mail: nurulsaadatun@tganu.uitm.edu.my

Munirah Salam

Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA Terengganu
Sura Hujung, 23000 Dungun, Terengganu
E-mail: munirahsalamat@tganu.uitm.edu.my

Ramha Rozaili Ramli

Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA Terengganu
Sura Hujung, 23000 Dungun, Terengganu
E-mail: ramha636@tganu.uitm.edu.my

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Abstract

The 13th General Election (GE) draws close towards all the contesting parties. Even though the Prime Minister is still being secretive and full off riddle about the actual date of the GE,

the signs of GE nearing Malaysians are very strong. Among them were the 2010 BN Convention and the closed meeting between Najib and all the BN Parliamentary Members had indicated the obvious of the looming GE. On the BN side, spirit is high as they had won few small elections, riding the momentum of changes brought by Najib Tun Razak. On the Opposition Coalition (Known as Pakatan Rakyat), they will be tested again as the ruling government compared as an opposition force in previous GE. 13th GE is expected to be one of the toughest and most open general elections when both sides have an equal amount of chances. The question is will the kind of strategies implemented and issues brought up will be accepted by the people. This study will look on the opportunities, chances and challenges face by both BN and Pakatan Rakyat in the upcoming 13th GE based on content analysis and few main issues that occurred in the period of 2008-2012.

Keywords: General election, Democracy, New politics, Plural society, Political hegemony.

1. Introduction

It has been almost four years since the 12th General Election (12th GE) held in March 2008. The failure of National Front (BN) to defend their 2/3 majority as expected had drawn a new dimension in Malaysian political landscape that typically shaped by extreme communalism & BN political hegemony.

Many agreed that the result of the 12th GE was astonishing. Political observers coined the result as a 'tsunami' phenomenon for its unsuspected nature with very appalling consequences. This is due to BN's first loss the 2/3 majority in Parliament and also handed over five state governments to the opposition collation (later on reduced to four as Perak returned to BN after four PKR and DAP assemblymen including the UMNO Bota assemblyman, Mohd Nasharuddin Hashim whom rejoin UMNO once again after joining PKR in January 2009, jumped to the BN and declared their mistrust to the government of the day). In the federal level, BN still formed the government by controlling 140 parliamentary seats while the Opposition only has 82 seats.

Many had seen the 'Pak Lah' factor (referring to the fifth Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) as the main contributor to the failure of BN. Ironically that was the same factor that had contributed towards the astonishing victory of BN in 2004 when he lead BN in that general election as the Prime Minister. Obviously, the reformation agenda and the political openness brought by him were rejected by the people. It seems to repeat the history of the failure of 'glasnost' (openness) and 'perestroika' (reformation) by Mikhail Gorbachev that was responsible for the fall of the Communist Party power over the Soviet Union in 1992.

Even though it is in a different nuance and political context, the situation were almost similar when the openness and the reformation brought by Abdullah Ahmad Badawi could not be accepted by the dynamic Malaysian community, especially the middle class that had a slower tempo of development due to economy pressure since it was born by the development politics and the ability of the government to provide prosperity thru a liberal market economy in the 1980's and the 1990's.

The shift of power happened in 2009 after Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was not able to cope against the pressure that was asking him to step down from his position. This had saw Najib Tun Razak had taken over the job as the 6th Prime Minister of Malaysia. After a year leading the nation, many believe that the general election will be held once again so that he will receive a new mandate for his leadership. This is according to the practice of previous Prime Ministers that they will hold the new General Election few months after they had sworn. But, Najib Tun Razak had to postpone his wish with the reason to restore the people faith on BN.

By 2011, 13th General Election is a common topic. Even though only God and the Prime Minister knows when is the actual date of the general election, few events such as the BN convention and 2010 Pakatan Rakyat, the delay of the selection for BN party components and the change of the Communication Head of BN in few states have strongly indicated that 13th GE is fast approaching.

When ever the date is, the participating political parties should hasten their preparation to face it. In order to do that, a very important step is to calculate and evaluate one's opportunities, chances and challenges before entering the actual duel so that the strategies implemented will work. This paper work will try to evaluate opportunities, chances and challenges for both BN and Pakatan Rakyat. This paper work will try to evaluate the opportunities, chances and challenges for both BN and Pakatan Rakyat. It also can be seen as a prelude before the actual general election that expectedly will be held around June to September 2012.

2. Malaysian Political Landscape Post 12th GE: A Critical Survey

There was few interesting development since post 12th GE. It begun with the return of the '*favorite son*' of Malaysian political arena, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim into the mainstream world after he had won back his old constituency in Permatang Pauh soon after he was discharged by the court on the charges of sexual misconduct. Ironically he was again, he was charged with the same charge in 2008 in the Federal Court that involved his personal aide, Saiful Bukhari Azlan. Malaysian political landscape then was colored by the series of 13 Small Elections (SEs) and the recent outgoing Tenang State Assembly Election has rack it up to 14.

The victory of Pakatan Rakyat in eight of the SE compare to five that BN won had showed the momentum gained from 2008 GE are still continued by the people. On their defense, BN has claimed that those victories were gained in the strongholds of the Pakatan Rakyat but then it has somehow shaken the spirit of the BN party to face the next incoming general election.

Few national issues such as the murder of Altantuya, the lost of the TUDM jet engine, the Scorpene submarine purchase scandal, BN 'power seize' over the Pakatan Rakyat government in Perak, the death of Selangor EXCO's political secretary - Teoh Beng Hock while he was in the investigation by the Malaysia Anti-Bribery Commission had play some major influence in those SE. Those issues had become a potent weapon in stopping BN from defeating Pakatan Rakyat.

On BN side, everything had gone wrong during the SEs. Multiple strategies that been used to defend and win those contested parliamentary areas were not just. Generally, the selection of the less credibility candidates that had back records was the main reason behind the fall. This can be seen when BN lost in the election process in parliamentary area such as Kuala Terengganu, Bukit Gantang, Sibul and Permatang Pasir State Assembly (DUN) were mainly resulted from the factor of the lack of credibility showed by the candidates that has a bad background. To make things worse, BN had made the choice not to compete for the Penanti SE until the Deputy President of PAS; Mohammad Sabu had labeled BN as 'Mengkuang Road Queer' due to the BN action.

However, BN still manage to defend their power in DUN Batang Air, Sarawak and Parliamentary area of Batu Sapi in Sabah. BN can even be proud due to the fact that they had managed to take back the Parliamentary area of Kuala Selangor and DUN Galas from Pakatan Rakyat. Even though there are some disputes that those parliamentary areas won were originally BN's strong hold, still it had restored some of the morale of BN and its team to compete against Pakatan Rakyat in elections.

Whatever the issues and occasions that were in the background of those small elections, the sure thing is that the emerging of the new generation of voters in Malaysia that already made their choice. This generation is getting more mature and capable of doing their own political analysis which is better then the previous generation that were too influenced by the media propaganda and the extreme rhetoric of the governing party.

This generation will create a new political culture that seem to cultivate and rooting itself in silence. The formation of the new generation was closely related to the process of urbanization, the increased literacy, the economical prosperity and most importantly, the access to the information by the advance of technology. This social evolution process had been going on since 53 years ago, where the long period of time had surely changed the mind set of the generation and later translated into actions. Globalization and world without

boundaries created through information and communication technology (ICT) had been the medium of the changes that basically tore down the racism in the political understandings

To understand that politics is the art of possibilities, strategies in politics too, act the same. Strategy in politics always co-exist with the changes that happened whether it is in the form of issues, economical or socially. Thus, the success of a political strategy in any election is closely related to the ability to understand the changes that influenced the voters' political behavior.

In the 12th GE, current issues had been seen as the main factor that influenced the voters' behavior compared to economy and social aspect. This is due to the voters in the 12th GE were systematically infused based on their high alert on current issues where it had been very beneficial to the Pakatan Rakyat. The ability of Pakatan Rakyat to strategies and manifest their election through orientation that lead towards the current issues, make it national or local had contributed for their success.

On the contrary, BN still used the development and racism politics as their basic unit of bargain. In the same time, the 'feel good' factor that always has been on BN's side in every election was gone in the 12th GE. Basically the rise of petrol price that had triggered chain reactions in the increment of living cost added with the push on common and universal issues were parallel to the political maturity of voters.

Normally the political strategy was build based on the issues that can not be included under one same group. It is due to every issues are different to all race and class need. In a very Malaysian context, the triumph of BN manipulating the racism issue to cover up the class issue had pretty much contributed to their victory in every single election. Moreover, BN performance that managed to bring economy stability by implementing close control had managed to cover the class awareness compare to racism. At the end, the stability and prosperity brought had slowly opened the door towards the centralized of power that later shaped a constructed society that accept BN hegemony without questions.

As example, MCA, GERAKAN and MIC are parties were the worst hit by the result of the 12th GE. The big lost of those political parties were due to the lost of 'stable' votes from respective races as the tendency of the Chinese and Indians voters to be more tactical than their normal. Wan Abdul Rahman (Riduan 2008, p.89-90) look at this matter from the angle of the economical power possessed by the Chinese had made their 'strategically' votes that had later will be beneficial to the Chinese. In this matter, he sees the HINDRAF members there were inappropriately treated by the police force (majority of police force are Malays) issue the re-branding of the NEP by using the '*Najibnomics*' (a term used in Harvard to explain the economy approach by Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak) were related to the 'Malay Domination' that portrayed the Chinese as a remote race that need to obey and follow the Malay lordship.

In this context, Wan Abdul Rahman (2010, p.198) had look on the political strategy were compiled in a way so that it will become parallel to issues that could be digested by different groups. Firstly, the issues that affected the middle class access towards civil right, the purchasing power, the rights to speak, good governance, government extravagance, the judiciary transparency and the integrity of all the ministers and the government servants were raised as main bargain premise. Second, issues that are affecting the lower class access towards the rise of living cost, poverty, inflation and un-employment were put up as a strategy in winning votes. With consideration that it is more effective to move the changes in political environment generally, those issues also had influenced the whole party movement, and if the strategy is been lay out nicely, it could even create a political 'wave' thus influencing those grey voters to change side.

From the analysis above, four key factors were seen as the main challenges for the contesting political parties in the 13th GE. Firstly, racism is no longer the dominant issue but it is now the universal issues are taken as the main indicator in plotting strategy. Secondly, the class issues do influence the voters more as it creates the 'wave'. Thirdly, the changes in generations that had created a new political culture that is punitive and rational. Lastly, easy access to the information due to the information technology boom had generated more liberal, critical and selective thinking compared to previous generations.

3. Marching Towards 13th General Election: Challenges, Chances and Opportunities

There is no denial that the incoming 13th GE is very hard to predict. The 12th GE had showed the maturity of the voters that silently punished BN. The premise was different compared to the 1999 phenomena when the people materialized their disagreement in street rallies that were known as the movement of reformation. In the 12th GE, in the gloomy campaign, the statement by Lim Guan Eng quoting as ‘an ant versus the giant’ had portrayed the lack of confidence of the Pakatan Rakyat in facing the GE. Who will think that the people had ready to show their strength?

Election normally indicates that in political realm, everything is possible. Even though there will be new politics, it will not allow every politicians to discard completely the old political elements. Racism sentiment that is still thick should be handled wisely by every political party. In the structure of Malaysian society that is much segmented, it is very hard to create a government due to the restriction from groups that has equal amount of power but with different opinions as they tend to really defend their own group, thus creating equal amount of votes during elections (Mujibu 2009, p.3). That matter most probably will not happen if it is seen through the Malay, Chinese and Indians perspective. The fact that it will always be a problem when it is interpreted as Malay versus the Non-Malay.

Looking at it through the angle of chances and opportunities, the idea of ‘One Malaysia’ is seen as a process of de-communalism that had always been labeled to BN. The governance of Datuk Seri Najib is trying to re-branding himself as the Prime Minister to all races when the idea was continued in multiple programs such as Government Transformation Program (GTP), Economy Transformation Plans (ETP), the liberalization of the economy and opening BN into open membership. However, there were some of his programs that seem to be targeting some specific races. As for example, his visit to China as a celebration of the 35th years of Malaysia-China relation and the invitation of the Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh to launch the ‘Little India’ project in Brickfields had been seen as Najib’s attempt to re-gain the trust of the Chinese and the Indians hence gave legitimization of his leadership.

The biggest challenge for Datuk Seri Najib in approaching the people actually comes from persons whom were close to him. This is seen as statement from the Deputy Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin which was deemed to be racist and not parallel to the spirit of ‘One Malaysia’ promoted by his chief. His statement of “Malay will always come first, then Malaysia” in the House of Representative conference had portrayed BN as not serious in doing the transformation promised.

In the same time, the pressure from the second largest component in BN – MCA, thru its president Datuk Seri Chua Soi Lek want UMNO not to act like the ‘big brother’ in BN and demanded for the word of ‘Malay Lordship’ is not used amongst the UMNO leaders had also slowed down the de-racism process in BN. That demand was made in surprise in an ongoing BN Convention. Even though the convention were held at the San Choon Hall belonged to MCA compared to the usual venue of PWTC (belong to UMNO), with Najib with all his might to use multiple languages and dialects that signifies BN, that did not stopped Chua Soi Lek to put forward his demand openly, in front of UMNO and other 13 party components.

These two items will need to be deal and control wisely and fast. The failure to do so will give opportunity to Pakatan Rakyat to continue to make BN a laughing stock. In the same time, it is scared that it would be misinterpreted by supporters of both parts, that will later generates doubts and eroded the ally ties and slows each other. On the people side, it is almost like BN is still not ready to be freed from their rigid racism cocoon even though they do bring the idea of non-racism as a national agenda.

On the Pakatan Rakyat angle, the short period of time that they have to fulfill promises and manifesto demands is seen as their main threat. Few states such as Selangor, Kedah and

Penang still have some carry due manifestos. The continuous battering from the pro government media by sensationalizing issues such as flood relief in Kedah, the relief fund sourced from gambling source in Penang, and the appointment of Selangor's SUK crisis could pretty much effect the Pakatan Rakyat government.

Pakatan Rakyat should not continuously use the universal issues in their political strategy in this incoming 13th GE as their position as a ruling government had put them in the position of 'those who are being judge' compared to before. The decision of the 12th GE that were on their side had indicated that those votes received by them were due to the cause of protest by the people against the lack of efficiency in the government in dealing with people's problems, which were more on the hike of items prices and the rise of living cost. In this situation, people had their 'microscope' more on their performance as a government and will surely compared to the previous BN governing.

In the incoming 13th GE, there are two items that could be the deciding factor of triumph and failure for the contesting political parties. Taking 13th GE will commence in a very peaceful environment, without the wave of giant issues such as in 10th and 12th GE, the Prime Minister and the performance of the Pakatan Rakyat governing is predicted to be major factors in campaign strategies. Basically, looking at history itself, new Prime Minister will always receive high amount of votes when they contested the first time for GE. Tun Abdul Razak received 87.66 percent of seat proportion in parliament in 1974, Tun Dr. Mahathir 85.71 percent in 1982, and even Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had 93.21 percent of seat proportion in parliament in 2004 – the biggest ever BN's triumph. Maybe the factor of being new and giving up chances by the people had played some major role in those victories. Even though Najib had taken a little longer to announce the election date, thus washing away the new Prime Minister title, it is undeniable that his approach of 'One Malaysia', ETP, GTP and even sitting down watching football recently with the people could probably sells.

For Pakatan Rakyat, their performance will be measured as a government during the coming general elections. Thus, for PKR and DAP, they will emerge as a government, as compared to before. Meanwhile, for PAS, who has an experience of being a government since 1990 in Kelantan will try to defend Kedah, as they did for Terengganu in 2004. The main challenge for Pakatan Rakyat will be their performance and keeping up to their promises to the people. Efficient management, effective administration, good handling of the economy and fulfilling the needs of the people, will be the criteria on which the people will judge Pakatan Rakyat on. Basically, their position as a government will be more open towards attacks, as compared to before, when they were the opposition.

4. Conclusion

The competition in GE 13 is expected to be unpredictable and stiff. The voters' attitude is changing; they are aware of current issues and know that they have a choice. Plus, the voters are now more mature and are able to do their own analysis well enough. Therefore, the contending parties will have to rethink their strategies in order to win over the voters.

The new political challenges will be a test again for the contending parties. Among four of the new political challenges will be; the emergence of universal politics to replace racial politics, the awareness of class through general issues, the rise of a new generation which is more judgmental and rational, and finally, the transparency of information and the advancements in communication technology will certain be the determining factors on the rise and fall of a government.

It cannot be denied that BN has been working towards modernization to win back the people's hearts. At the same time, Pakatan Rakyat will indefinitely face rigid challenges to retain its share of the wins that they had previously won from BN. History tells us that the winning momentum of the opposition parties will be almost impossible to repeat in subsequent general elections, especially when facing challenges by a new Prime Minister. Terengganu 2004 would be the perfect example of that instance.

However, the chances, opportunities and challenges faces by all contending parties will always be present and open. The important point is the intelligence of the party in strategizing according to the needs of the people. This is because the foundations of politics should carry the aspirations of the people, in line with the concept of democracy which was proclaimed by Abraham Lincoln “Government of the people, by the people, for the people”.

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