



## Umno's offensive tactics

BN under Najib Razak has adopted a take-no-prisoner strategy, aiming to secure every victory in its column. It has moved from a defensive strategy after the March 2008 polls to the offensive.

The BN has begun campaigning the day after its representatives passed away and brought in a well-funded nationally driven effort to win each and every contest, backed by favourable timing of the election date, strategic decisions to place contests simultaneously to put themselves at an organisational advantage and a willingness to do almost anything to win, from buying votes to the use of government vehicles to ferry party supporters.

What has emerged from Umno is a pummeling of blows on the opposition - as they have tried to recapture the multi-ethnic label through 1Malaysia, aimed to shatter the confidence of PAS by challenging their representativeness of the Malay community, used race-based campaigning to put strain on opposition cooperation across parties and distracted the leader of the opposition in a legal trial.

This combination of shots at the head and gut of the opposition point to the intensity of the BN effort to win each round, and in the process hold onto the big prize of national power.

The victories have instilled greater confidence in Umno, but arguably at the expense of their component parties. The MCA in particular has been showed to have consistently lost the majority of support among its Chinese base, even with some small movements here and there, and its own role within the BN coalition has been undermined.

In the blind battle to win every round, the BN has engaged in a high-risk strategy of feeding racial tensions and increasingly relying on money for its campaigning.

While in some places such as Galas and Tenang, the BN has strengthened its organisation on the ground, the party has not yet substantively addressed some of the core reasons it lost support in the 2008 polls - infighting, arrogance, perceived corruption and a distancing from its traditional base.

Ironically, in choosing to adopt race-based and financial heavy strategies, they are reinforcing some of the very weaknesses they faced at the polls nationally in 2008, and it is a mistake to assume that these issues have gone away.

The BN and Umno have chosen not to adopt a more substantively positive message of delivery and results, to show that they are strong enough to sustain blows. Little attention has centered on some of successes of Najib's tenure - economic growth and crime reduction. It is difficult to do so, since some of the successes have not been concretely felt by voters and many policies of the last two years have been promises and have yet to reach their possible potential.



Indeed, it is especially hard to instill long-term confidence when the dominant strategy has been one of sowing conditions of instability through feeding racial tensions with leaflets of hate.

The BN faces the most difficult obstacle of all, to rebuild trust across the different communities. While its efforts at outreach in the Indian community have yielded some increased support, it can easily evaporate through continued insensitivity over Interlok and continued concerns voiced by Hindraf.

Najib's popularity shows that he has made some headway personally, but it is not clear if he can carry his party or his coalition, especially given that some in his party are not giving him their support and many in the BN coalition feel more bruised and beaten than the opponent in the ring.

Arguably, the offensive BN strategies are not sustainable long-term or even in a general election. The BN may win rounds and make gains, as I expect they will do in both upcoming contests, but the questions emerge whether it is really winning and at what expense.

### **Pakatan's defensive maneuvers**

Pakatan has moved from a position of strength - winning Permatang Pauh and Bukit Gantang - to one of defensiveness. This decline began after the Manek Urai by-election of July 2009, when PAS scrapped through with a slim 65 majority in its heartland state of Kelantan.

While the opposition won Sibul as the underdog contest in May 2010, its failure to win Hulu Selangor in April and make substantial headway in BN territory afterwards has fostered the impression that it has lost ground.

While it shows up to contest each by-election, there is almost a defeatist approach starting from Bagan Pinang in October 2009 as it gets ready to be beaten up by an opponent in an uneven playing field.

The bruises on the opposition are showing, and recent changes in tactics to focus on what they perceive to be their Malay deficit by PAS in particular show they are having an impact. Merlimau and Kerdau will show whether the opposition has the ability to adapt and maneuver effectively, or whether it has lost its footing.

For the opposition, these contests will be largely local - local candidates with the immediate effect of building up local machinery in places where they have comparatively limited grassroots. The tactics and campaigning they adopt, however, will have national implications.



First and foremost, will be how PAS adapts its campaign strategy, especially in Kerdau.

Pahang is more of a PAS frontline state than Malacca, and the home of rising leaders in the party, vice-president Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man and the party Youth chief Nasarudin Hassan.

The double-contests of a multi-ethnic seat in Malacca and Malay-majority seat in Pahang will force PAS to

come to terms with how it will formulate its national message.

PAS' campaign decisions will send a signal whether it will prioritise an exclusive intolerant "moral" supremacy strategy that led to their losses of 2004 - recently reemerging among some PAS leaders aka condemning the expression of love of Valentine's Day - or is focused on common ground Pakatan strategy of justice and reform that is more nationally holistic.

These contests will show whether it has learnt that PAS' conservative narrow moral agenda does not go down with a large share of Muslims. It will also continue to test the ability of the party to reach out to Felda settlers, whether it can offer an alternative to rural voters that is not based on patronage.

Finally, it will challenge PAS to address how it can improve the conditions for the Malays outside of the NEP framework.

The tactics used by Umno under Najib have apparently had their effect on PAS, as they have chosen more Malay- oriented positions and focused in engaging the Umno attacks. So far, they have been on the back foot. Some have reverted to old comfortable positions. Others have embraced more forward-looking efforts, as the party is uncertain and divided on the strategy to pursue.

PAS' conference last weekend on Malay identity shows the recognition of a needed rethinking, but simultaneously highlights the challenges the party is facing. They have yet to clearly present an alternative for Malaysian empowerment that is outside of race and religion. Little is heard about what PAS has achieved individually or in Pakatan in terms of governance or the economy.

### **Beyond the political fight**

Part of PAS' challenge is that the opposition as a whole has not presented a clear vision of the future for Malaysians. What is Pakatan's agenda for the future? What exactly have they accomplished after they won over a third of seats in Parliament? In defensive mode, the opposition remains unable to articulate coherently a clear set of priorities and initiatives for the future.

There have been important statements such as the 100-day plan, but any real discussion of the policy issues have been buried in larger attention to personal attacks and engagement in defensive mode.

Attention has largely focused on Penang and Selangor to the exclusion of discussion of PAS' states - Kedah and Kelantan. The key will be how Pakatan moves towards presenting a genuine alternative based on their own performance nationally, rather than in response to their opponent's agenda or the showcasing of specific individuals.

Minimally, Pakatan's footwork has not been consistently coordinated. While it is an accomplishment to stay in the ring, to take the punches, and worked together as a coalition that many believed would not last even a few rounds, standing in the ring is not enough to win national power, as the contests in Merlimau and Kerbau will show.

With politicians across the spectrum centred on the fight in the ring - now going for 16 rounds - they have in many ways lost track of the audience. The fight has been dirty, full of illegal punches, and not necessarily even. It is not inspiring.

Merlimau and Kerdu offer both sides the opportunity to come out with dignity, as the contest is as much about the results as the tactics. Who opts for the long-term strategy that showcases Malaysian positive successes ultimately will be at the advantage in winning the grand prize.

**[DPM wants to win by-elections with bigger majority](#)**

DR BRIDGET WELSH is associate professor of political science at Singapore Management University. She will be observing both by-elections. Welsh can be reached at [bwelsh@smu.edu.sg](mailto:bwelsh@smu.edu.sg).