

Najib not quite the Hulu conqueror



Bridget Welsh
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Najib Razak and the BN won bragging rights in Hulu Selangor. A win is a win. The BN had the advantage up-front with its machinery and resources for this large semi-rural constituency and it used these effectively.

To date, the focus has been on BN's use of financial incentives to woo voters. This has been a long honed practice, especially in the rural areas. It is nothing new, and part of any by-election. To understand the dynamics on the ground, one has to look further.

To attribute Najib's victory on money politics obscures important transformations taking place within the BN. The use of ethnic politics and new messaging underscored the BN's campaign.

The BN's efforts may have helped secure a win, but the long term points worryingly to further political challenges.

Comparatively, this election mattered more for the BN, especially Najib. Najib has staked his political future on a victory. Since he assumed office in April 2009, Najib has lacked his own political mandate. Hulu Selangor, with the slim 2008 majority of only 198 votes, gave him an opportunity to show both the public and, even more important, his own party that he could win.



It is thus not surprising that the dominant message in the BN campaign was focused on him, from the posters to the unprecedented prominent role he played in the campaign. The prominence of his concept 1Malaysia reinforced the Najib connection.

To date, Najib has staked his future on improving the economy. Najib needs political room to implement difficult policy decisions that go to the core of the future of the country - economic reforms. He needs to cut the use of subsidies, improve state revenues, remove ethnic-based preferences (aka the NEP) and generate new sources of growth.

Without economic reforms, the country faces serious obstacles in maintaining its competitiveness. These reforms will not be easy to carry out. He will need public support. Sadly, the size of the victory does not give Najib adequate political space for hard economic decisions.

Focus on Najib's personality

Najib's personal battle involved more than the public and his policy measures. Listening to Najib on the campaign trail, it was clear that the election was centred on damaging his political enemy - Anwar Ibrahim.

With innuendos such as “main belakang” and references to how US President Barack Obama personally supports him, Najib used the opportunity to continue the battle for national leadership that is playing out in the courts and through censure motions in Parliament.

The BN's use of personal attacks on Zaid Ibrahim is an extension of the series of attacks on members of PKR from Anwar downwards. Najib and the BN engaged in an all-out war against the opposition because the increasing power of the opposition has become personal to them, a challenge to their positions and wealth.

The prime minister's focus on personality rather than his deliverables suggested an element of insecurity on Najib's part. One of the reasons for this insecurity involves increasing pressure from within Umno itself.

Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin took the opportunity to cast a shadow on Najib's victory by contrasting the target of 6,000 with the slim victory of 1,725.

In fact, Muhyiddin is not far off from traditional patterns of BN - largely Umno - support in this seat. By showing that Najib did not make this target, he has maintained the pressure from inside Umno on Najib to meet the needs of the party and address many of the concerns of the ultra-Malay chauvinist agenda.



Najib faces a real challenge of securing the support for economic policies and simultaneously building security for his party members who are concerned with their own positions. Najib's personal battleground - from Pakatan and Anwar to Umno and Perkasa - was played out in Hulu Selangor, and it is long from over.

The intensity of the BN campaign reflected this high stakes involved. The BN went all out and it translated on the ground to hard work, zeal and pressure in local communities. Many in the Malay Felda areas of Ulu Bernam, for example, expressed fear of being ostracised for supporting the opposition. Many villagers were genuinely afraid of the implications of not voting for BN.

This was the product of the hard court press of the BN machinery, which was well-oiled from beginning of the campaign and much stronger in localities, especially in Batang Kali. The opposition lacked the same networks to exert pressure, and some Malay and Indian villagers wisely opted to follow along rather than challenge the local BN campaigners.

It is striking to see the low voter turnout in many Malay areas, as many stayed home in a quiet protest rather than oppose the BN machine. It was not a surprise that tensions were high in areas, with small fights on election day as a result of how the national intensity was translated on the ground in rural communities.

Umno throws its weight

There was another unspoken weapon held over the heads in this campaign. It involved the component parties - MIC and MCA. They were called to deliver or face further encroachment in their power base by Umno. Weakened and riddled by factionalism, both the MIC and MCA struggled to show that they had support among their respective traditional constituencies.

At stake was the future of seat allocations, ministerial positions and even more intense issues of their future in the BN as threats of bypassing these parties altogether were banded about, largely as rumours. They reinforced a real sense that Umno was throwing its weight around.

This was most obvious for MIC, as the emasculation of the party through the candidate selection illustrated publicly the weaker role it plays in BN. The MIC branches - those that opted to campaign for P Kamalanathan - understood it was a matter of their survival not just in Hulu Selangor but nationally. Umno was waiting in the wings to take over the seat.

For MIC, they may have won a respite for their seats and



gained a potential settlement of the Maika scandal in the process.

The leadership of the party remains at question, as does the fundamental fact that the MIC has a long way to go to bringing Indians back into the BN fold.

One cannot ignore the fact that any gains have to be seen within the lens that this has been a MIC seat for over 10 years before 2008 and they won less than an estimated 60 percent of the Indian vote. This is not quite a national mandate for the MIC.

For the MCA, reeling from battles inside its own ranks, the cracks spilled over into the campaigning, with party president Chua Soi Lek's late arrival on the ground in a constituency that had considerable popularity within the MCA for Ong Tee Keat. The MCA faced real pressures to show its relevancy and did not win recognition in this contest as Chinese voters overwhelmingly rejected their efforts.



Chua said it best when he talked about the need to address issues nationally and move beyond its grassroots campaigning in villages to secure votes.

The reality is that some of its own party workers are not loyal to the party in the voting booth. MCA had less to lose short term in the contest, but in the longer term serious questions of relevancy and its ability to effectively represent Chinese Malaysians loom.

Both the MIC and MCA have to face the fact that the BN has changed. Umno is more in control than ever before. Non-Malay voices inside the BN coalition are apparently being ignored and this was evident in the campaign itself.

Logistically, substantial BN cooperation - touted as the new campaign strategy - was minimal, as parties focused on their communities. Rarely did they work together, except with Najib's visits.

In order for the non-Malay component parties to win back support they need to show that they are respected and appreciated by Umno, that Malays in Umno believe that Indian and Chinese leaders and members within BN should be genuinely included. This did not come across during the campaign, and is a even more serious challenge nationally as Umno interferes in these parties as factional fights over leadership develop.

Ethnic politics within the BN itself was also a factor shaping the Hulu Selangor campaign. The MIC won the most as some Indians did come back to support the BN, while the MCA faces even more obstacles as a result of the further erosion of Chinese support.

BN rebrands itself

The BN campaign in Hulu Selangor was not just well-oiled and highly politically motivated, it was one of its best campaigns. It challenged the core of Pakatan Rakyat's identity. First of all, the BN fought to undermine Pakatan's call for "change".

They focused on local sentiments of neglect and blamed the new Pakatan state government. While this did not fully resonate, the fact that the area was under multiple sovereignty undercut the ability of the opposition to rally voters along the same lines as they did in 2008.

The BN slogan "Mampu Berubah" (Ability to change) - illustrated the recognition that they have to change. While most saw this cynically, some voters acknowledged this new tone. Clearly the arrogance of Umno before 2008 was not repeated in their Hulu Selangor campaign messages. Instead they used the slogan "Yes We Can".



Another key dimension that was challenged was the multi-ethnic composition of Pakatan. The BN used the 1Malaysia concept to portray that it was inclusive. While the campaigning on the ground was racial - vote for the Indian in Indian areas, voting for Pakatan is a vote for a Chinese government in Malay areas, voting for BN is a vote for Malay power - to paraphrase comments made at BN rallies and reports from voters - the 1Malaysia umbrella was multi-racial and Najib's campaign efforts were as well.

The issue here is that the BN worked to try to win back the label of being the multiethnic representative that assured "stability". Voters reported mixed acceptance of this message, but it clearly was more sophisticated and goes to the heart in challenging Pakatan which has aimed to portray itself as more multi-ethnic.

The final element was an attempt by the BN to portray themselves as 'Generation-Y'. Najib's campaign was linked with a new generation of leaders and an attempt to reach out the young. The idea was to showcase a new generation of Malay leaders for Malaysia.



This also goes to the heart of another dimension of Pakatan's support, as it has presented itself as young and its engaging of the younger voters has resulted in greater political support.

These new themes in the BN campaign show that BN is changing how it is packaging itself. On the ground, many of these messages were not effectively delivered by the BN campaigners, who are locked in historic molds of race-based campaigning, use of incentives and mind-sets of entitlement. Yet, one cannot ignore that the BN at the top showed the most innovation and ingenuity this campaign.

Further polarisation

There was a cost for the political use of these messages. 1Malaysia aims at inclusiveness. It has now become a BN political tool used for political expediency. It now serves to alienate many rather than engage, in part due to the fact that people used the slogan while simultaneously adopting tactics of race and character assassination.

From Hulu Selangor onwards, Malaysian voters may potentially be increasingly become polarised around the 1Malaysia concept. This does not bode well for inclusion across races. In order to win over voters in the long term, the BN needs to implement real changes within itself and in its engagement with voters. The campaign remained highly racialised even as the messages were not. A slogan is not enough.

Further by associating himself with the Hulu Selangor campaign, Najib has entered the fray of election politics like never before. The new messages revolve around his leadership. They have the potential to raise his own personal stakes in future by-elections.

Ironically, he may have made himself more vulnerable politically. He won Hulu Selangor in a tight race, but he now will have to face even more battles ahead as he has yet to fully emerge as the conqueror.

DR BRIDGET WELSH is associate professor of political science at Singapore Management University. She can be reached at bwelsh@smu.edu.sg