Umno plays race card, and unsettles many

Its strategy to lure back Malays contradicts bid to broaden BN’s appeal

BY LESLIE LOPEZ
SENIOR REGIONAL CORRESPONDENT

Headline-grabbing street demonstrations, public spats over the sensitive issues of race and religion, the alleged harassment of opposition politicians, the unresolved death of a key opposition political aide, are conjuring up images of a Malaysia ripped apart by political turmoil.

The real picture is less alarming, political analysts say. Still, they caution that the verbal slugfest could sour the country’s reputation as an investment destination.

“Malaysia remains very stable. But this debate sends out a message to the outside world that it is an unsafe place and such perceptions have economic ramifications,” says Malaysia-watcher Bridget Welsh, associate professor of political science at the Singapore Management University.

Like several other political analysts, Professor Welsh also warns that the increasingly shrill debate, particularly over the issues of race and religion, could easily spin out of control and further fracture race relations in the country.

“The race-and-religion discourse is based on the premise that if the rights of a particular group are challenged, the country will trip into instability. This isn’t a safe road to take,” she says, referring to the campaign spearheaded by several government-controlled newspapers alleging that the rights of the country’s politically dominant ethnic Malays were being challenged.

Malaysian politics have been on a roller-coaster ride since the general election in March last year, when the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition suffered its worst electoral setback in history, losing its traditional two-thirds majority in Parliament, and control of five key state assemblies to an opposition alliance headed by former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim.

Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was forced to step down early as prime minister to accept responsibility for the government’s dismal electoral performance, while the opposition government in central Perak state was toppled following the defection of three elected representatives in the state assembly to the BN early this year.

The problems facing Datuk Seri Anwar’s opposition alliance have also intensified over the last three months because of internal ideological splits and attacks from BN politicians. After winning four by-elections convincingly since the March polls, the opposition coalition narrowly held on to a state assembly seat in the north-eastern state of Kelantan in July, providing a major boost to the BN coalition government.

On the back foot, Mr Anwar’s opposition alliance struck back early this month when it organised a weekend rally that drew more than 20,000 supporters, mostly ethnic Malays, to the heart of the capital Kuala Lumpur to protest against the country’s tough security laws that allow for detention without trial.

Ethnic Malays have long formed the bedrock of support for the BN’s leading party, the United Malays National Organisation (Umno). Analysts say that the presence of particularly young Malays at the street demonstrations spooked Prime Minister Najib Razak and his government, which is trying hard to renew its appeal with the public.

In this context, Umno-controlled newspapers, particularly Malay-language daily Utusan Malaysia, have embarked on a campaign to reclaim the Muslim-Malay ground by branding segments of the community aligned with the opposition as traitors to the race and to Islam.

Whatever the direction the inflammatory race debate takes, it is making many uncomfortable.

News commentaries have also appeared arguing that the attacks against government agencies like the Anti-Corruption Commission, which is embroiled in controversy over the unresolved death of an opposition political aide while in its custody, smack of efforts by non-Malays to undermine Malay-dominated institutions.

Analysts say that the race debate is part of a strategy to lure back Malays who abandoned Umno in the last election and force sections within the country’s main Islamic opposition party, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia or PAS, to question their allegiance to Mr Anwar’s multi-racial alliance.

But the Umno-led campaign flies in the face of a national programme dubbed “1Malaysia” and promoted by the Prime Minister to renew BN’s appeal among voters.

“It comes across as two-faced,” says a senior leader from the coalition’s Malaysian Chinese Association, who asked not to be named.

Analysts believe that Mr Najib is reluctant to rein in racist elements within Umno because the Prime Minister has yet to entrench his own legitimacy.

Mr Najib draws his support mainly from Umno, and his national appeal is mixed at best, based on BN’s losing streak in five by-election contests since last year’s general election. Few analysts, if any, expect him to call for fresh national elections to seek a personal mandate.

What’s more, he must face his party when Umno holds its annual congress later this year, that can be portrayed as diluting Malay rights will undermine his political position.

The last time race issues came to a boil was in 1987, when a badly split Umno rallied against the Chinese community over the position of vernacular schools.

At the time, Mr Najib, who was the party’s youth wing chief, led a large gathering in the centre of Kuala Lumpur which warned of unrest if the non-Malays didn’t back off. Tensions eased after the government arrested dozens of opposition politicians and activists.

Opposition politicians are whispering that the government’s conspicuous silence in this latest race-card campaign may be part of a ploy to pave the way for a repeat of the 1987 security crackdown.

But analysts like Prof Welsh say that Malaysia has changed.

“There is greater public mobilisation that cuts across race that won’t accept this,” she says.

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