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Malaysia's GE13: A Tale of Two Manifestos

By Cassey Lee [Guest Writer]

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Political competition in Malaysia has intensified since the 2008 General Elections which saw opposition parties making significant gains at the federal and state level. After the formation of Pakatan Rakyat in 2009, Malaysia has slowly evolved towards a two-party system.
 - The 13th General Elections will be one of the closest election races since the country's independence. Both the incumbent political coalition (Barisan Nasional, BN) and its rival (Pakatan Rakyat, PR) have issued election manifestos to stake their claims over the election landscape. Issues include corruption, cost of living and public safety. The approaches adopted in addressing these and other issues differ, however.
 - Furthermore, while BN has chosen to emphasize its past performance and track record, PR has pledged to undertake major governance-related reforms.
 - Both manifestos also signify a shift towards making Malaysian politics less ethnic-based.
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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's forthcoming 13th General Election (GE13), scheduled to take place on the 5th of May 2013, will be one of the closest election races since the country's independence. For most voters, the choice of whom to vote for will be primarily framed in terms of the two major political coalitions, namely the incumbent Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

A key aspect of this political competition is the election manifesto issued by each political coalition, which provides an opportunity for both to articulate their assessment of voter concerns and how they intend to fulfill related goals. In this sense, both are seeking a specific mandate from the electorate to implement policies and programs pledged in their manifesto as well as a broader consent to pursue yet-to-be-identified means to achieve identified goals. Once elected, the winner will be held accountable to its pledges. Thus, the election manifesto is an integral part of the democratic process and to democratic governance.

There is some anecdotal evidence from recent press coverage to show that politicians consider election manifestos to be important to their chances of being elected. BN has been reported as planning to organize 66,600 ceramahs (talks) daily over the 15-day campaign period.¹

Both BN and PR have also accused each other of copying their manifestos. There is however little information available about the extent of voters' awareness of the two manifestos. This essay critically analyses both manifestos with the aim to see whether they differ significantly and what their implications can be for public policy following the elections.

THE TWO ELECTION MANIFESTOS

Election manifestos have clearly become more important since the country's last general election held in 2008, which saw opposition parties wrest control of five state assemblies and rob the BN of its traditional two-thirds majority in the federal parliament.² One consequence of the surprising results of the 2008 election was the formation of Pakatan Rakyat as a formal political coalition in 2009. This represents a significant milestone in the evolution towards a competitive two-party political system. In 2008, DAP, PAS and PKR each had issued separate election manifestos with some differences in emphasis (*Table 1* and *Table 2*). With the formation of PR, the coalition embarked on the formulation of a series of political manifestos aimed at articulating a unified set of vision and policies. These include the Common Policy Framework (launched 19 December 2009) and Buku Jingga (19

¹ "BN to hold 66,600 ceramahs to explain its manifesto", *Malaysian Insider*, 13 April 2013.

² The five states are Kedah, Kelantan, Penang, Perak and Perlis. Perak later fell to BN in 2009 after the defection of three PKR state assembly members.

December 2010), both of which came to provide the foundations for PR's GE13 election manifesto titled "Manifesto Rakyat: Pakatan Harapan Rakyat" (launched 25 February 2013).³

Table 1: Political Manifestos: GE12 & GE13

	GE12	GE13
BN	Security, Peace, Prosperity 21 pages	A Promise of Hope 31 pages
DAP	Malaysia Can Do Better! 1 page	Manifesto Rakyat: Pakatan Harapan Rakyat 35 pages
PAS	A Trustworthy, Just & Clean Government 39 pages	
PKR	A New Dawn for Malaysia 20 pages	

Source: Author's compilation

The Barisan Nasional's election manifesto entitled "A Promise of Hope" was launched on 6 April 2013. Since this was announced five weeks after PR's, there have been accusations that BN copied some of the issues and pledges contained in the PR manifesto. The PKR strategy director, Rafizi Ramli, even provided a quantitative assessment of the originality of BN's manifesto: 22 of the 157 pledges were new (14 percent), 23 (15 percent) copied from PR's election manifesto, and 112 (71 percent) were from BN's current programmes.⁴

There was also a counter-claim that PR had copied from the BN government's policies.⁵ Whilst it may be difficult to prove who copied who, this debate may have arisen due to differences in the way the election manifestos were drafted. PR's manifesto was written by a high-level committee involving representatives from the three major parties of the coalition (DAP, PAS and PKR) based on the Common Policy Framework and Buku Jingga.⁶ On the other hand, being the ruling coalition party, BN is likely to have harnessed the resources of various government departments to draft its manifesto. The copious amount of information (relating to past achievements) and the semantics of the manifesto certainly suggest this.⁷ While there may be nothing wrong with this – it being an advantage enjoyed by an incumbent – it may have constrained policy innovativeness.

³ The PR's election manifesto can be translated as "People's Manifesto: Pakatan is the People's Hope".

⁴ "Only 14pc of BN's manifesto is original, says PKR" *Malaysian Insider*, 9 April 2013.

⁵ "Manifestos: Muhyiddin Claims It Was Pakatan That Copied BN" *Malaysian Digest*, 9 April 2013.

⁶ "Pakatan to unveil 'common manifesto' at national meet" *Malaysian Insider*, 24 December 2011.

⁷ For example, when submitted to Turnitin (an popular academic plagiarism checker), at least seven percent of the Manifesto's text are similar to sources from the Prime Minister's Office and Treasury. These are likely to be from Budget speeches.

Table 2: Coverage of Election Manifestos: GE12 & GE13

	GE12				GE13	
	BN	DAP	PAS	PKR	BN	PR
Economy						
Employment		•			•	•
Inflation / Cost of living	•		•	•	•	•
Lower fuel prices			•	•		•
Income support		•			•	•
SME / SMI	•				•	•
Budget deficit	•					
Tax reforms			•		•	•
Minimum Wage			•	•		•
Foreign workers		•				•
Competition policy		•		•		•
Development						
Poverty	•	•	•	•	•	•
Rural infrastructure	•				•	•
Regional development	•					•
Utilities – access water/ electricity	•	•			•	•
Agriculture & food security			•			
Felda settlers' welfare			•			•
Quality of Life						
Housing	•				•	•
Healthcare facilities	•	•			•	•
Healthcare financing			•			
Public transportation	•	•			•	•
Gender			•		•	•
Childcare		•				
Utilities – affordable water/electricity		•				
Education						
Free education			•	•		•
National schools	•	•	•		•	•
Scholarships / PTPTN	•		•	•		•
University autonomy	•	•	•	•		•
Innovation, R&D	•		•	•		•
Public safety						
Crime rate	•	•	•		•	•
Illegal immigrations	•				•	
Police force reforms	•	•	•	•	•	•
Public Sector & GLCs						
Public service quality	•	•			•	•
Public service remuneration (salary, COLA)			•		•	•
Revisit privatization projects		•			•	•
GLCs (Proton)		•				•

	GE12				GE13	
	BN	DAP	PAS	PKR	BN	PR
Governance						
Corruption	•	•	•	•	•	•
Public procurement		•	•	•		
Independent judiciary			•	•		•
Electoral process reforms		•	•	•		•
ISA, OSA, UUCA		•	•	•		•
Local elections		•		•		
Media policy reforms			•	•		•
Social Unity & Equity						
Islam	•		•		•	•
Foreign policy	•				•	
Environment		•	•		•	•
Natural resource / Petronas			•	•	•	•
Petroleum royalty						•
Bumiputra business					•	
Orang Asli						•

Source: Author's compilation

COMPARISONS AND COMPLEXITY

The debate on the originality of manifestos aside, it may be entirely possible that voters may not care whether pledges in one manifesto were copied from another. The key question is whether the two manifestos differ fundamentally and, if so, which of them is more expressive of voter concerns.

There are certainly some differences in terms of the issues covered (see *Table 2*). Many governance-related issues highlighted in PR's manifesto are absent in the B's. These include: independence of the judiciary; electoral process reforms; abolishment of the UUCA; local elections; and media policy reforms. On the other hand, the PR manifesto does not have any commitments on foreign policy.

The manifestos also differ in terms of the pledges offered to solve similar problems/issues highlighted in each. The number of overlapping problems/issues is fairly significant (*Table 2*). However, in terms of implementation, the BN's and PR's approaches are very different from one another on a number of problems/issues, such as cost of living, car prices and education (*Table 3*). Where cost of living is concerned, BN's approach focuses on extending targeted income support and government-subsidized retail stores, whilst PR highlights price of fuel, utilities, transportation as well as industry restructuring via abolishment of monopolies. Whilst both sets of solutions are likely to affect price levels, their implications for the nature of government intervention, the role of market forces, and fiscal matters are likely to be dissimilar.

In other areas, such as car prices, pledges are more specific and quantifiable – the abolishment of excise tax (PR) is likely to reduce car prices by more than 20-30 percent (BN). Other pledges are more difficult to compare, mainly due to differences in the extent of details provided. In general, BN provides more detailed pledges compared to PR. Such differences exist in the areas of housing, education, health and infrastructure. This does not indicate that BN's manifesto is superior in these areas, as it is likely to reflect the advantages of being an incumbent ruling party (i.e. having access to the government's planning machinery). The difficulty in comparing pledges is compounded by the fact that they are often complementary in nature, and interrelate in different ways.

As documents, the election manifestos are certainly complex - making it difficult for voters to compare them effectively. Be that as it may, one must nevertheless ask if the voter concerns are addressed and to what extent.

Table 3: Approaches to Key Issues/Problems in Election Manifestos

Issues/ Problems	BN's approach	PR's approach
Corruption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MACC's recruitment autonomy and ranking of MACC senior officers within civil service • Special corruption courts • Integrity pacts for MPs and assemblymen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce Corruption Elimination Policy (DEBARAN) • Restore independence of MACC from political control • Restructure MACC's power and leadership • Restructure practices and process of MACC • Amend anti-corruption laws
Cost of living	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower prices at government-subsidized retail outlets • Targeted financial aid (schooling, book) • Income support for household below given income threshold • Price controls on essential goods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower petrol and fuel prices • Lower electricity and water tariffs • Abolish highway tolls • Abolish monopolies
High car prices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction of car prices by 20-30% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abolish excise tax within 5 years • Liberalize automotive industry
Affordable housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build 1 million affordable homes • Focus on government housing • Re-settlement of squatters • Housing in estates • Abolish stamping fees for some first home buyers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build 150,000 affordable homes • Establish National Housing Corporation – for affordable housing development

Issues/ Problems	BN's approach	PR's approach
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater emphasis on English, science and mathematics • Scholarships • Single session schooling • IT infrastructure and facilities • Teacher training and incentives • More schools, improve access 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reform education system • Focus on school leavers through establishment of training schemes, technical universities and vocational schools • Free higher education at public institutions
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce a national health system to improve access • More facilities - heart, cancer, dialysis, aged, terminally ill 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reject healthcare tax • Free healthcare • Improve specialist facilities for low-income group • Improve doctor-citizen ratio
Public safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase police personnel • Expand patrol services • Improve welfare of police and armed forces • Enhance capability of armed forces to deal with foreign threats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase police remuneration • Allocate more resources for CID vis-à-vis other areas • More police posts • More resources for forensic investigation • Improve veteran's welfare
Environment & Natural resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentives for investment in renewable energy • Greening cities • Protect and enhance rivers, streams and forests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Halt Lynas rare earth plant • Reform logging laws
Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand urban rail network • Implement high-speed rail • More individual taxi permits • Build new highways • Expand existing highways • Expand water and electricity coverage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate Klang Valley transport network • Expand Klang Valley bus system • Implement high-speed rail
Public Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater transparency in public procurement • Review of remuneration scheme • Improve counter services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Contracts Commission • Review of remuneration scheme • Independence from political interference

Source: Author's compilation

MATCHING PLEDGES TO PREFERENCES

What are the main concerns of the Malaysian voters? Are these addressed by both election manifestos and to what extent? In a recent opinion poll by the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research conducted in January and February 2013, the top three issues that the public (in Peninsular Malaysia) feel that the Federal government should address are (in order of importance): corruption, public safety, and inflation (*Table 4*). Even though there have been some changes in the level of concern for each of these issues over time, that level has remained high and relatively stable.

Table 4: Issues Needing Attention from Federal Government – Peninsular Malaysia

(% of respondents indicating issues as 1st and 2nd priorities)

Issues	Dec 2011	Feb 2012	Apr 2012	May 2012	Jun 2012	Oct 2012	Dec 2012	Jan 2013
Corruption	49	60	46	44	47	52	51	46
Inflation	32	25	23	22	29	25	21	23
Public safety	23	21	16	15	22	27	13	28
Housing	20	21	14	14	21	22	24	22

Source: Public Opinion Survey N°1/2013, Merdeka Center for Opinion Research

The two manifestos have clearly attempted to address voter concerns. Based on the survey results, corruption appears to be the top issue in the GE13. Both manifestos contain pledges to reform the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) although there are marked differences in their approaches. A key difference is the independence of MACC from political interference – a pledge made in the PR manifesto. This and additional pledges on independence of the judiciary and media reforms are likely to reinforce the view that PR's approach to tackling corruption represents a more fundamental shift.

On the issue of public safety, both manifestos include pledges to channel more resources to the police force. In addition, PR has promised to undertake structural reforms of the police force by putting greater emphasis on crime investigation compared to other non-core activities. In the case of BN, a general commitment is made to enhance the armed forces following the foreign incursion into Sabah which occurred in early February 2013.

Manifesto pledges relating to inflation or cost of living are fairly specific and differentiated (see earlier discussions). It is not known whether voters would prefer the approaches taken by BN or PR in their manifestos. Lower-income voters may benefit more from targeted income support and subsidized essential goods as per BN's pledges. In contrast, PR's pledges on fuel and utility prices are likely to benefit a wider spectrum of society (especially the middle class).

Beyond these and other specific pledges, the election is also contested on broader issues. On the first few pages of BN's manifesto, voters are reminded of the importance of BN's track record and performance as well as the risk of changing government. In contrast, PR's manifesto begins with the emphasis on the "fraternity of people" based upon, amongst others, the elimination of racial discrimination.

There is some evidence that these issues are in fact likely to be important. In the survey by the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research discussed earlier, the percentages of respondents that have a positive perception (happy) towards the government and BN's performance stood at 48 percent and 49 percent, respectively. The corresponding figures for dissatisfied (negative) respondents were 42 percent and 40 percent, respectively. More importantly, there are significant differences between the different major ethnic groups (*Table 5*). The Malay community is generally more satisfied with the performance of the government and BN than the Chinese community is. Equally important is the fact that even though the Malay community is generally more satisfied with the government and BN, it has a lower evaluation of their performance on ethnic-related issues. The Malay community is also more open to non-communal political representation than the Chinese community. These findings suggest that BN's emphasis on its performance will resonate with Malay voters, but less so with Chinese voters. PR's focus on elimination of racial discrimination is likely to sit well with all communities. Even though there has been racial rhetoric leading up to the election, BN has not chosen to position itself strongly along these lines.

Table 5: Public Perception towards Government, BN and Racial Issues in Peninsular Malaysia, 2013 (% of respondents with views)

	Overall		Malay		Chinese		Indian	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Performance								
Government	48	41	63	29	20	72	51	43
BN	45	44	60	32	16	68	52	43
Racial Issues								
Govt's role in curbing racist statements and sentiments	39	52	51	42	16	68	40	58
Impact of race rhetoric on BN	36	42	42	35	22	54	38	41
Non-communal political representation	44	51	25	72	78	18	53	40

Source: Public Opinion Survey N°1/2013, Merdeka Center for Opinion Research

CONCLUSIONS

How will voters vote in Malaysia's 13th General Election? This analysis of the election manifestos *per se* cannot provide any predictions of the election outcome. What it does provide is a partial view of the political parties' election strategies. The manifestos are also testimonies of how political competition has evolved in Malaysia. Barisan Nasional, the ruling coalition, has clearly tapped into its access to government machinery and resources to put up an election manifesto that emphasizes its competence based on past performance and track record. On the other hand, the election manifesto of Pakatan Rakyat has tapped into public concerns about governance related issues such as corruption, independence of the judiciary, media policy reforms and electoral reforms. Pakatan's emphasis on ending racial discrimination and the absence of an opposing stance from BN in its manifesto

may be a sign of a move towards a less ethic-based politics. This is, to some extent, consistent with changes in voter preferences based on findings from recent surveys. Overall, despite claims and counter-claims of manifesto copying, the two election manifestos are fundamentally different.

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