

Strong new popular pressure for better governance



Protest movements in Turkey and Brazil have demonstrated how quickly even democratically elected governments can face eruptions of popular discontent, facilitated by new digital tools for grassroots organisation. Similar forces helped fuel a strong debate on corruption in the Malaysian election.

As it begins five more years, the government must learn to swim with this new tide of popular sentiment. Political success in a broadband world requires responsiveness to public demands, greater transparency and a robust anti-corruption posture.

One striking aspect of the campaigns was the rising use of social media, which allowed for easy dispersion of information.

Many reporters started calling this election a “social media election.” For instance, the number of people tweeting about politics in Malaysia has grown from 2,400 people in 2010 to 450,000 users three years later. Many Malaysian friends took to Facebook to voice their opinions about the election, share YouTube parodies, etc.

This is an exciting development for Malaysia. Social media expedites awareness of problems that require a government fix.

It mobilises groups that want to take action. Greater ease of communication also gives a bigger voice to those who suspect corruption.

Mainstream media is no longer the sole source of information, and hiding unsavory activity is becoming more and more difficult. This force will encourage transparency in Malaysia, making malfeasance more difficult for public officials.

Better organisational tools will require the new government to improve its responsiveness to these public

demands or face a stronger, faster reaction.

The force of social media to propel grassroots activism and harass non-performing governments is well-appreciated from its impact in China, the Arab world, and most recently in Turkey and Brazil.

Malaysia has seen this, too, as immediately after the elections social media helped organise the “Black 505” rally of 120,000 in Selangor. Social media involvement will be crucial for Malaysia’s political and economic development in the coming years.

So if the election showed the impact of greater online mobilisation and information sharing, what can the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition do in its new term to change course?

The government must make a real impact on Malaysia’s corruption problem, and to do so it must align itself with the information age by proactively improving transparency and responding to public demands.

As its motivation, the government should focus on reaping the (lawful) rewards of a successful economy, which a major change towards clean government would enhance.

Corruption harms the investment climate, distorts the allocation of resources and hampers the implementation of important government programmes.

Despite this drag, Malaysia remains one of the most vibrant economies in Asia. Last year FDI amounted to approximately RM163 billion and the economy is set to surpass that later this year. But Malaysia should do much better. To facilitate long-term inclusive growth, the government should promote policies that will be applied fairly and transparently to all.

As a first step in the direction of transparency, the government should consider taking away party ownership of selective media enterprises.

Although media coverage of corruption scandals has increased over the years, the government maintains influence on the content of public TV and radio outlets as well as through links to some of Malaysia’s largest privately held media groups, such as Media Prima.

This influence has not benefited the quality of reporting. Malaysia’s Press Freedom Index ranking fell dramatically

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last year to 145 out of 189, with the index publishers, Reporters without Borders, citing “access to information ... becoming more and more limited”.

The public deserves to know not just what top government officials have done right, but also what they have done wrong, so they can keep their leaders accountable for their actions.

Secondly, Prime Minister Najib Razak needs to follow through on the promises he made during his election campaign. Unfortunately his comments on fighting corruption lacked specifics.

Najib needs to lay out detailed steps on how he wishes the government to change and enforce these changes effectively. For instance, a more transparent, meritocratic system for selecting project managers should be implemented to avoid appointment based on family or political ties.

Finally, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and the Public Complaints Bureau, need to work on improving their impact.

The MACC has been criticised for laying too much focus on small cases and being ineffective in tackling larger, high profile cases. Proper treatment of high profile cases would

Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission officers stand at attention during its launch in Kuala Lumpur on Feb 24, 2009. – Reuters

earn greater respect for anti-corruption rules at all levels of the bureaucracy.

The Malaysian electorate is poised to place a great deal more pressure on its new government. While it remains to be seen whether the government will respond as hoped, its people are pushing for radical change.

Malaysia needs leaders who are willing to take drastic measures to tackle corruption. Let's see if it has elected one.

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