

COMMENT

Fair wind for BN in Terengganu

THE NAJIB TOUCH: The prime minister's popularity should keep Pas at bay but the state machinery needs to pull its weight

IN Terengganu, Umno and Pas are scrambling to put their election machinery in place ahead of the approaching general election. Umno is looking forward to a thrilling finale as its archival makes another attempt to win the hearts of the Malay-majority electorate in the oil-rich state. Terengganu voters had turned out the Barisan Nasional government in 1999 after decades of being under the coalition's rule. But when elections were held again in 2004, they decided to throw Pas out and return power to BN.

They realised that Pas had failed to meet expectations; the party did not make good on its election promises.

Terengganu folk could see that Pas president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, the then menteri besar, although a respected religious scholar and preacher among the locals, did not possess the desired skills to manage a state with over a million people.

The impending 13th general election will also be a test for the leadership of Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Ahmad Said, who will lead the Umno-led BN charge in the state for the first time.

His tenure in office will pass the four-year mark next month and, to his credit, he has strengthened BN's grip on the state, introducing various people-centric programmes and projects.

BN may be confident of retaining control of the state at the next general election but Pas is expected to put up a stiff challenge via its equally energetic candidate for menteri besar, Abdul Wahid Endut.

Terengganu Pas' old guard — Hadi, Dewan Ulama chief Datuk Harun Taib, secretary-general Datuk Mustafa Ali, former national Youth chief Datuk Abu Bakar Chik and Datuk Wan Mutalib Embong — have all decided to play advisory

roles at the state level.

Hadi is said to prefer to forego his Rhu Rendang seat to defend only the Marang parliamentary seat, while Harun is likely to call it quits in Manir.

There has been talk of Mustafa contesting a parliamentary seat. The other two old-timers no longer have an interest in taking part in the elections.

Terengganu Pas has been waging a psychological campaign against Umno for two years now, trying its best to capitalise on the rivalry between supporters of Ahmad and those of his predecessor, Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh.

Crowds at Pas' night ceramah and Hadi's Friday morning lectures have thinned, but the party maintains that its message is being spread online and in CDs.

Wahid, the party's state commissioner, Wakaf Mempelam assemblyman and Kuala Terengganu



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The people of Kampung Bahagia in Manir, Terengganu greeting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak during his visit last May.

member of parliament, has a set of younger faces in his team and they have been instrumental in the "Pas Ganti Umno" (Pas Replaces Umno) campaign.

The state Pas has recently beefed up its general election manifesto, promising among others to create jobs, waive quite rent and provide free water up to 20 cubic metres per month per household.

So, despite Ahmad's people-oriented style, a switch in voter sentiment cannot be ruled out, particularly with the infighting in Umno.

But it remains a tall order. Pas failed to win Terengganu in the 2008 general election when BN governments in Selangor, Kedah, Perak and Penang fell, and Kelantan was retained for another term.

In the 2008 polls, the party managed to garner only four more seats than it won in 2004: winning Bukit Payong, Sura, Ladang and Bukit Tunggal, while retaining Rhu Rendang, Manir, Wakaf Mempelam and Batu Buruk.

BN toppled the Hadi-led Pas government in the 2004 general election by winning 28 of the 32 seats in the state assembly. When Pas came to power in Terengganu in 1999, it also won 28 seats.

Only a few months ago, Terengganu Pas spoke about adding nine seats in the next general election to the current eight, bringing its total to a simple majority of 17. This estimate has since come down to 16, possibly because of BN's increasing popularity. A year ago, Pas thought it could win 19 seats.

While Terengganu BN continues to bank on its track record as a government capable of bringing meaningful development and helping the people to continue to rule in Terengganu, its machinery appears to be dependant on the popularity of Prime Minister Datuk

their first job, from one another. The latter is truly a zero-sum game.

Being more open-minded and cross-border oriented would also be a powerful stepping stone towards the eventual creation of more dynamic economies in the migrants' home countries.

I cannot imagine that, in a labour market of 500 million people, with many young people without a job, German employers cannot find good personnel in other countries.

In the age of social media and Skype, it is not too difficult to screen for talent, even over long distances. Over the medium term, that is a far more productive human resource strategy for large firms than the practice they are now beginning to engage in — trying to use headhunters to poach young professionals, who are only just into

Seri Najib Razak to keep Pas at bay.

Colourful banners and posters have been put up in Kuala Terengganu on Najib's working visit to the state today, during which he will distribute government aid to the people, including fishermen in Hadi's home base of Rhu Rendang in Marang.

Umno leaders are expecting a large crowd in Rhu Rendang despite it being a Pas stronghold, as large as during Najib's visit to Manir last May, if not more.

Najib's presence in BN's "black" or "grey areas" will no doubt work to the coalition's advantage, but a commitment by the local machinery will surely boost it to an unassailable lead.

If the 400-odd Terengganu Umno leaders and frontliners who pledged to unite at last weekend's retreat in Janda Baik keep to their word and be as committed as the prime minister, retaining the state will be a breeze.

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How Europe can get back to work

LABOUR NEEDS: Ease workers' movement to maximise human resources

BEYOND a shadow of a doubt, the reform of labour markets is ultimately the most critical part of the reform process in the eurozone and across the European Union. Only successful measures in this arena can bring about a lasting, future-oriented turnaround for Europe.

The European heads of state have to focus on strategies to reduce unemployment.

While the goal is clear — growth must be stimulated everywhere and unemployment must be brought down — we must resist the temptation to believe that there is any

one-size-fits-all solution.

Each country can and must develop its own strategy for labour market reform. Each country, not Brussels or anybody else, is thus in charge of its own destiny. That is, so far, a very simple reason.

Labour market conditions, requirements, options and challenges differ from one country to the next, often significantly.

Some countries have a very high share of services in their national economy, and thus depend greatly on domestic demand.

Others rely heavily on exports and must prepare themselves for

possible slowdowns on that front.

Then there are also those who still have to evolve from an over-reliance on agrarian structures. Others must focus on reducing dramatic levels of youth unemployment.

But even countries where unemployment is already quite low, such as Germany, have to contend with serious challenges. A shrinking workforce and pressures on social security systems suggest incentives to postpone the retirement age and doing much more to integrate women into the labour force. The latter is an area where France and the Scandinavian countries have provided impressive examples of how to get it right.

And while there is no role for the European Commission in Brussels to prescribe any specific, possibly even uniform path of reform, there

is a useful role the commission can play.

It should monitor and incentivise countries' progress on labour market liberalisation and the creation of new jobs. Incentivising positive change would be a truly constructive use of the commission's monitoring capabilities.

The current mindset — obsessing about countries' budgetary performance and imposing penalties on countries that are already in grave fiscal difficulties — is bound to be counter-productive.

Specifically, the EC can strengthen labour mobility across Europe by fostering collaborations between the national labour offices to exchange information about job openings and interested workers and create the very much needed European online job market.

A much stronger labour mobility of European workers is key to creating additional growth by reducing the waste of human resources.

Similarly, we Europeans may speak a total of 23 official languages within the EU, but that should not keep us from doing much more to recognise professional training certificates in a far more open-minded fashion across borders.

Here, Germany may become an early centre of attention and reform. Because of sustained economic growth, the German labour market is moving toward full employment.

With the gradual decline in the country's total population, the odds are that there will be more jobs to fill in Germany in the future

than there are new labour market entrants each year.

At the same time, the Germans have been on the forefront of those especially concerned about having the "proper" training certificates for new employees.

Take the example of Turkey, a labour market of 500 million people, with many young people without a job. German employers cannot find good personnel in other countries.

In the age of social media and Skype, it is not too difficult to screen for talent, even over long distances. Over the medium term, that is a far more productive human resource strategy for large firms than the practice they are now beginning to engage in — trying to use headhunters to poach young professionals, who are only just into

done together over the past several decades, without any act of government planning.

An honest accounting especially of northern Europe's needs and responsibilities would also lead us to think very differently about North Africa, especially university graduates from Tunisia or Egypt.

We talk a lot about the rapid ageing in Europe. Meanwhile, the average age in Egypt is 24 and 28.7 in Tunisia. If the Turkish example has demonstrated one thing, it is that both sides can benefit, even in unexpected ways, from the exchange process.

This example teaches us that we must open our eyes to the potential. That these strategies meet our labour market needs while aligning quite neatly with the EU's foreign policy certainly does not hurt.

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Nuisance of roadside parking

HARD LESSON: Return the space to pedestrians for a fitter populace

THE view from the departure level of the Kuching International Airport at dawn last Saturday was sweeping and commanding. The sun had not quite yet crept out over the city's suburbs from the airport's vantage point, but a pristine, sunny day seemed assured, if the mist nestled around the distant Matang hills were anything to go by.

A giant car park the size of the entire airport terminal sits right across from the airport. Unless it is that time when families and friends turn out in force to send off pilgrims to the haj, the car park is seldom more than half-full, even during the airport's peak hours.

Naturally, most cars congregate near the terminal building. Some were simply and illegally too near

on that Saturday morning and most other times, too, one suspects.

There is a central median road for access into the car park through pay booths and one around the facility's perimeter for easy exit, again through the pay booths at the median road. The perimeter road is at least the width of three cars and that appears to present a rather familiar problem.

Cars are neatly parked on the left and right throughout the entire length of the road running across the front of the terminal building on non-existent bays so traffic becomes constricted to just a narrow one-car lane.

It appears many car owners were determined not just to be as near as

possible to the airport building but the nearest possible, whatever the illegal consequences and inconvenience to others may be.

It would have been excusable if it had been a rainy day, or if all available parking bays had been taken up. And so it is everywhere in the city, and likely everywhere in the country as well. Chances are, we will forgo a proper parking lot if there is a space nearer still to where we want to be, never mind if that space is not meant for parking.

Someone once suggested that to keep our people trim and fit, it is necessary that we keep our streets slim as well, the better to afford car users no opportunity to park or even stop right before a shop front.



Enforcement officers busy issuing parking summons at the Kuching International Airport.

At a time when the government is worried about a population increasingly weighed down with such life-threatening ailments as stroke or diabetes as well as growing incidences of obesity — and the huge expense involved to treat the consequences of unhealthy lifestyle choices — it behooves us to enforce a healthier lifestyle if people do not naturally opt for it.

This writer is happiest when there is proper parking space available a decent distance from where he intends to go. We all never get enough exercise these days from our sedentary lives and should be thankful of the chance for a few extra quick paces to get to where we want to be from our parked cars.

There will be the inevitable initial public hue and cry, but let us remove all the roadside parking

spaces and narrow our roads if that is the only way to prevent drivers parking indiscriminately.

Return all those spaces to pedestrians and other city-dwellers in the form of wider thoroughfares for walking, or benches and sheds for rest and recreation.

Back to the airport. Enforcers seem to be doing a decent job penalising offenders who cannot resist parking along the broad road to the arrivals and departures drop-offs.

They also need to bring to book those who constrict the access roads in the car park by parking where they are not supposed to.

If we cannot discipline and regulate ourselves in the most elementary of civic manners, we need to have it slapped on us — hard and for our own good.



John Too