Between Bersih and BR1M

The two Bs are what separate urban and rural people’s wishes and wants. The two Bs separate the classes. The two Bs are good indicators of voting trends.

It will be a battle between the two Bs: Bersih or BR1M. When? The general election of course.

Alright. I’ve spent three consecutive columns on “the coming polls”. so I promise this week’s will be the last on “the coming polls” for sometime to come.

It’s just that in the run-up to the “coming polls”, I’ve come across a few comment and opinion gems in conversations with reporters, business people, politicians (yes, I must speak to them as well) and academics.

So it turns out “the coming polls” might not be so “coming” after all.

It seems Bersih 3.0 — to be led again by Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan, who has promised to stage nationwide “sit-ins” — has complicated things.

A month-and-a-half ago, I wrote that sources swore the elections would be in June. On the other hand, Bersih 3.0, if handled improperly, could further push back “the coming polls”. (It’s worth remembering the first Bersih rally was six months before the 2008 general election, and we all know how that turned out for Pak Lah.)

Allow me to devote just one more paragraph to when the 13th general election might be held.

Barisan Nasional would prefer elections to be soon after BR1M ends, and the announcement on the minimum wage policy, which will come into force on Labour Day.

The later Barisan calls for polls, the more time for the Opposition to prepare. If the window of opportunity in June is missed, then the next most suitable date is in September, after Ramadan and Hari Raya.

Bersih 3.0 has muddled things greatly for the Barisan and there can be no doubt the protest organisers
had that in mind. On the surface, they say the national sit-ins are to test the Government’s commitment towards peaceful assemblies. They also feel the later the elections are held, the more time it gives to compel the Election Commission into adopting fairer practices.

For those unfamiliar with Bersih, its proposals are well and good. There’s little reason as to why things like automatic voter registration should not be implemented. So, it will be a battle over the two Bs. Forget the other concepts; the “1” in BR1M stands for more than all the other “Is”, and for one simple reason only – money.

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If you care more about Bersih, then you’re very likely to vote for change. You’ve heard the Opposition’s promises and you talk often about democratic ideals.

If you are more concerned about BR1M, you’re more likely to vote conservatively. A Barisan insider told me recently that he remained confident of rural support because RM500 still means a lot to the rural people. Voting conservatively because of BR1M reflects the “jangan lawan tauke” (don’t go against the boss) sentiment is still prevalent among rural voters.

An academician summed it up quite well during a recent chat. “The middle- and higher-income segment all think issues like democratic ideals matter to everyone. Well, that’s not true,” said Prof Andrew Aeria, a political scientist at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak.

“Go to the rural areas and speak to the people there — Lynas, corruption matters and Bersih fades into nothing. Why? Because RM500 means the world to them when a decent earning is so hard to come by.”

For Pakatan Rakyat to make rural inroads, Aeria said they would have to work “10 times harder”. “And I’ll tell you now that they haven’t done it well. Not just here, but in places like rural Pahang; where is the Opposition? Where is their rural base?”

Bear in mind that this is coming from a staunch supporter of middle-class ideals; Aeria has moderated forums from public healthcare to “Who is the Boss”.

In a nutshell, land grabbing scare tactics isn’t going to beat BR1M. The opposite is true in urban centres. In places like Kuching, Sibu and Miri, people are very well connected. Internet usage is high, most are well-informed and some are very wealthy.

In Kuching, for instance, the slogan “Politics of Development” has not worked for several elections. “Urban people, by and large, are going to vote for the Opposition irrespective of most things,” Aeria said.

“Generally, the quality of life in Kuching is extremely good compared to not just other places within Sarawak but also others in the country. Urban centres in Sarawak are middle-income strongholds.”

So, which will determine the outcome — Bersih or BR1M? Until April 28, it’s going to be a wait-and-see game.

“(And by the way, next week I’m definitely staying clear of politics. I’m stating here that I shall be writing about the sad state of the former State Legislative Assembly Complex.)
Waiting in line: Recipients of BR1M queueing up in the rain outside the MBKS Indoor Stadium in Kuching in this file pic. Will they vote conservatively or otherwise?