

Undecided young voters

By ALAN TING

IT is estimated that seven million young voters will vote in the next General Election and their support could determine its outcome.

A recent survey conducted by Barisan Nasional (BN) Youth Lab provided some insights into the thinking of young voters when it comes to national politics. Most of them are believed to be adopting a more non-partisan stand.

The majority of youths are not supporters of political parties, and the survey showed that three in five Malaysian youths were undecided on their votes. Of those surveyed, 62% said they were still 'sitting on the fence', with regards to BN and Pakatan Rakyat.

The details of the survey, together with policy proposals, were presented by BN Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin and his BN Youth Lab team to BN chairman Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak last

week, and will be made available to the public at a 'town hall' meeting with the prime minister, scheduled on Aug 20.

A series of surveys were conducted nationwide between March and June, by the BN Youth Lab programme, including through social media, to explore issues and problems affecting Malaysian youths today.

The major concerns voiced by the interviewees were employment, education, rising cost of living and public transportation.

"They will vote for whoever they believe is better, in the next General Election," noted the survey, which was conducted by a special research group formed to assist the ruling coalition in formulating appropriate policies pertaining to the younger generation.

The BN Youth Lab findings were very much in tandem with the current political trend highlighted by various political observers and analysts, said media studies senior lecturer at Universiti Malaya, Dr Abu Hassan Hashbullah.

"The young voters now are more liberal and constructive and they do not weigh an issue based on political ideology. They can just switch their support or react to a situation any time," he said.

He added that the young generation no longer held on to a politician's word or promise, but would instead evaluate how the parties concerned handle various issues.

However, the director of Parti Gerakan think-tank, Sedar, Khaw Veon Szu, believes that most of the youths were still very much inclined towards the opposition, even taking into account the 60% who are undecided in the survey, according to BN Youth Lab.

He said that voters kept changing, from month to month, adding that the



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general consensus for the 'young and the restless' was that they were in favour of the "other side", in reference to the Opposition.

Khaw said the Opposition had some "fixed deposit" in the Chinese community and this explained why they had gone all out to register new and young voters because they viewed them as another round of "fixed deposit".

One of the sectors that can bring immediate impact and big results that would strike deep into the mind and heart of the young voters is the revamping of the education policy.

However, some political observers and party members pointed out that what BN needed now were solutions to solve concerns raised by these groups, and not another survey to find out the problems faced by the young.

"You don't need to conduct a study or survey to do that. As a youth, I can tell you what the youngsters want - jobs, security, quality of life and good governance," a youth leader from a BN component party said.

However, Khaw said any type of survey was helpful and important to BN as it needed as much data as possible. This is exactly what MIC Youth is doing, following the findings of various surveys. One of the strategies it adopted is to have more young leaders leading the movement at branch and divisional levels.

MIC Youth chief T. Mohan said that on Aug 21, 50 new youth branches with young leaders would be established, apart from registering new member as

voters when they reached 21.

"Prior to this, we needed to wait until somebody relinquished his post or passed away. But now, the movement is seeing youth branch chairmen in their 20s and 30s," he said.

DAPSY chief Anthony Loke explained that the younger voters' greater inclination towards PR was largely due to the "push" factor from the BN and not the "pull" factor by the opposition pact or PR.

"We still need to work hard to attract them, by showing that we have better ideas, and can be a better government. The battle for young voters is still wide open. It's still an open market. The young voters will vote based on whoever can show that they are doing better," he said.

Therefore, Loke said, the Opposition was focusing on two approaches - more aggression in registering new voters, including through door-to-door visits. They will also be telling young people that registering to vote is empowering themselves to decide on what they vie as important.

UCSI University political analyst Ong Kian Ming said there had been no concerted effort by BN youth as a coalition to engage the youths on any concrete policy related to them.

"Taking the scholarship issue as an example, we don't see any concerted effort to resolve the issue until the announcement by the prime minister," he said.

On July 10, the Prime Minister announced that all students obtaining



BN Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin.

30+ and more for their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examination would receive Public Service Department (JPA) scholarships for either overseas or local universities.

Ong said, while the opposition seemed to be more appealing to the younger voters, it (opposition) could not take their support for granted as the previous election result did show some minor increase in youth votes for BN.

"In the 1999 and 2004 general elections, the youth voting pattern showed there was declining youth support towards BN, but in 2008, there was a slight increase for BN, particularly from the post-Reformasi generation aged between 21 and 30," he said.

In terms of leadership, he said, there were several leaders on both sides of the political divide who connected well with the youth. —BERNAMA