

Does green matter?

Earth-friendly agendas are emerging, though they are not necessarily well thought out.

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THE decision by the chairman of Kumpulan Hijau, Wong Tack, to enter the political fray has been seen by some as a case where environmental issues have become a rallying point for the elections.

Wong is the most public face of the Stop Lynas movement that aims to halt the operations of Malaysia's only rare earth refining facility at Gebeng, Pahang.

Of course, this is not the first time that the environment has turned into a campaigning issue. Back in the 1990 elections in Sarawak, Harrison Ngau Laing stood as an independent candidate and defeated Barisan Nasional veteran and former deputy minister Datuk Luhah Wan (and another independent candidate) in the 1990 elections to emerge as the Baram MP.

Now a lawyer, Harrison's fodder for campaigning back then was based on the struggle to protect the rights (especially land-related issues) of the Sarawak natives and the forests they live in. Ngau was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize that same year for his work to prevent deforestation.

So, do green issues really matter to the electorate?

Firstly, there is no universal agreement on what constitutes an environmental issue. For example, Kelana Jaya MP, Loh Gwo-Burne, thinks that Lynas is more of a public health issue, rather than an environmental issue.

Prof Jayum Jawan, a specialist on politics and government at Universiti Putra Malaysia's Faculty of Human Ecology, says: "The environment means different things to different people. A city dweller may treasure the forest for the recreational function it provides, while a forest-dwelling person treats the forest as a place where he can find food.

"A native is not going to appreciate things like saving the ozone layer, but he will be concerned if there is no more food to be found in the forest where he used to hunt or forage."

Jayum, a Sarawakian who is also the deputy dean for postgraduate studies, thinks that "green issues" are still associated with urban



Poorly thought-out: Election manifestos that promise the lowering of fuel and car prices can only lead to one thing: more severe gridlocks, air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

activists, as seen in the Save Bukit Gasing and Save Bukit Kiara campaigns.

"Even at the beginning, a lot of the activists against the (Sarawak) Bakun dam were actually Peninsular-based."

Deforestation, an issue that plagues all states, represents only one end of the spectrum when it comes to environmental challenges. It should be noted that in 2009, the timber sector was the fifth largest export earner for Malaysia. In 2010, the timber sector contributed to 3.7% of the GDP, 3.2% of the country's total merchandise export, and provided jobs to an estimated 140,000 people.

Looking at a wider angle, there are also other environmental problems, such as coastal erosion, poor air quality in urban areas, polluted rivers, unsatisfactory waste collection, sewage pollution, and an increasing reliance on fossil fuels for nearly everything.

Datuk Paul Low, chairman of Transparency International Malaysia (TI-M), shares similar sentiments: "My view is that the environment is going to be a non-issue as it is too far removed from the radar of the voters. Of course, the exception would be the orang asli as well as the Sabah and Sarawak indigenous people, which explains why Pakatan Rakyat (PR) came up with something on these com-

munities in their manifesto."

For Low, Malaysia is not like Europe, as far as the maturity of the democratic process is concerned.

"There, public awareness is very high, and candidates from green parties actually get elected. But I don't think any person from a Green party here will be elected."

As far as TI is concerned, it wants to see candidates who have better reputations and capabilities, because the quality of our Parliamentary debates can be much improved.

"What we want are lawmakers who discuss issues affecting the people, and are able to debate intelligently, pass good laws, and safeguard the interests of the public ... not the type who just bad-mouth people and indulge in gutter politics. All this is just showmanship, and doesn't add value to the nation."

Whether the public buys into green issues or not, some NGOs are taking the opportunity to goad politicians to declare their eco-credentials. For example, the Malaysian-Nature Society recently issued a public call for all political parties and politicians to declare their commitment towards the preservation of nature in a green manifesto.

"MNS notes with concern that regardless



Prof Dr Jayum Jawan of Universiti Putra Malaysia says at the end of the day, Malaysians are still concerned with bread-and-butter issues.

of political alignment, Malaysia's natural resources are still badly managed and consistently degraded and threatened. MNS hopes that the Malaysian public will support this important call to lobby for the protection of Malaysia's natural heritage, and make the upcoming general election a truly green election," said its president, Dr Maketab Mohamed.

Transparency's Low says: "The bulk of Malaysians are engrossed with corruption-related issues. Some surveys, such as those by the Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research, show that many people are concerned about corruption, which is an increase compared to five years ago. It is good that the issue of corruption is at the forefront so people will look at the character and integrity of the candidate. This is in itself a good thing."

Low points out that people want a clean and trustworthy government. And that would indirectly touch on environmental issues, such as the issuance of logging concessions.

"But I don't think people can directly connect the dots, so the focus is basically on corruption as well as bread-and-butter issues." But Jayum thinks environmental issues alone will not be enough to sway voters.

"I don't think Malaysians are ready for a party that campaigns purely on a green platform. I said that in 2008, and my view has not changed. It is unfortunate, but after 55 years of Independence, the preoccupation is still with bread-and-butter issues."