10/05/1998

PRM leaders soldier on despite limited support

Joceline Tan

THE narrow function room of the modest downtown Kuala Lumpur hotel was barely filled - a dozen or more people seated in a tight squeeze on a low stage and perhaps about 100 more making up the audience.

Going by the couple of signs put up by the hotel, this was an "AGM Syed Husin Ali."

Actually, it was the annual general meeting of the Parti Rakyat Malaysia and party members greeted the signs with resigned smiles.

They are used to this sort of things, the uneasiness among certain quarters about opposition politics. Besides, the hotel belongs to a well-known Umno figure.

The annual meetings of small opposition parties (known dismissively as mosquito parties among the big boys) like PRM are far from exciting or glamorous.

The party has neither the money nor manpower to host grand gatherings nor is it in its disposition to do so. Thus, its meetings are largely sober at best and rather dull at worst.

But that does not mean the party is dormant if the policy speech of PRM president Dr Syed Husin Ali that morning was any gauge.

The party conducts programmes among pockets of the urban underclass and it has well-argued views on issues ranging from the economy to the environment, corruption, globalisation and world politics.

In fact, PRM has one of the more intellectual leadership among fringe political parties. Both Syed Husin and secretary-general Dr Sanusi Abdullah (see CORRECTION above) were former university professors whereas deputy president Abdul Razak Ahmad is a well-known lawyer in Johor Baru.

It also seems to be genuinely multi-ethnic - both in terms of outlook and approach to issues.

Yet, in spite of all this, it has not had any electoral representation since 1969 while its political impact on Malaysian society is near negligible.

It has been unable to attract new and younger members even after dropping its "Socialist" tag in 1990. Its membership and support continue to lie among what are already elderly die-hards and middle-aged intellectuals.

Even its red-and-black logo of the buffalo and industrial wheel seems sadly out of date.

"I think it's the way the political landscape has changed," says Abdul Razak, who once lay across the railway tracks in Johor Baru in an anti-Zionist inspired protest.

Abdul Razak grew up in a highly politicised family and signed up with the party the moment he graduated from the University of Singapore.

"But the younger generation now is not interested in politics ... in university, they are like secondary school students," he says.

Just as there are now teenagers who think that Marx is the American pop singer, there are probably young voters who have never heard of PRM.

"We are like a party of last resort. People come to us when they have exhausted all other avenues and when times are good, they forget us," he says.

PRM is also disadvantaged by the way Malaysian politics has come to revolve around personalities - the dynamic Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the Barisan Nasional, Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat in Pas and the fire-

and-brimstone style of Lim Kit Siang in DAP.

As for PRM, it has Syed Husin who, though decent and intelligent, makes a poor politician in the conventional sense of the word.

In fact, during the 1995 general election, Syed Husin's BN opponents used the personality strategy to the hilt. BN campaigners in Petaling Jaya Selatan where he stood had argued: Syed Husin is Malay, a good man. But if he wins, who is his leader? Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang. But Donald Lim (the BN candidate) ... his boss is Dr Mahathir.

There is another painful irony. Although the party is well known for articulating the cause of urban squatters - its leaders have even stood in the path of tractors - Syed Husin found only limited support among this social group in PJ Selatan.

The bulk of his share of the votes in PJ Selatan came from the middle-class while swathes of the poorer voters opted for what the BN could offer them in terms of development.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia lecturer Halim Ali, a party leader during PRM's scientific socialism phase in the 1960s, suggests that PRM is a "victim of its own principles".

The party refuses to play ethnic politics and persists in injecting a moral basis to issues and problems, and that has been its strength as well as its weakness.

Syed Husin admits as much: "I suppose we are not a full-fledged political party in that sense. We don't exploit or sensationalise issues. We are less subjective in our approach ... maybe because of our academic background."

He remembers how party founder Datuk Ahmad Boestamam cherished hopes of the party gaining more ground support after independence.

"Boestamam thought that after Merdeka, there would be factories and workers, and they would form the base of our support."

Likewise, Abdul Razak, in his summer years, used to imagine that the coming generations would be more receptive to what the party stood for.

In retrospect, these men shared an over-optimistic sort of idealism. The world changed but not in the way they thought it would.

They simply could not anticipate the seduction of capitalism and this, together with the authoritarian excesses of Chinese and Soviet-style socialism, eventually led to the disenchantment for Karl Marx's grand scheme of a classless society.

According to Syed Husin, PRM candidates lost in all three parliamentary constituencies it contested in the last general election because of the "5Ms" - Money, Media, Machinery, Middle-class support and Mahathir.

Nevertheless, a decision has already been taken to contest the next general election and the party president hints at the possibility of an "electoral understanding" among the opposition parties.

"Not a pact, just an understanding to avoid clashes over seats," he stresses.

In fact, one of the panellists at the party forum had suggested that PRM act as the bridge between Pas and DAP, given the thorny relationship that the two have had in the past.

Gone is the "taking over the Government" kind of talk. The aim is now more modest and realistic: to have a strong opposition, to reduce the ruling party's two-thirds majority.

Very few people - inside and outside the party - believe the election results are going to be any different for PRM this time around, that if they think they can win anything, then they are dreaming on a moonbeam.

"All we can do is hope," says Abdul Razak.

"As long as they have the 5Ms ...." adds Syed Husin.

What seems clear is their determination to go on despite the odds. The

dissolution of the party has never been an option.

But, says social critic Rustam A. Sani, while PRM may not bear sufficient clout to win electoral seats, it still has relevance in the sense that it "draws attention to the things we don't always think about".

"It has to do with the importance of criticising, of articulating alternative views and perspectives to what we are doing, where we are going," he says.

Rustam is, of course, the son of Boestamam. He was a card-carrying member of the then unabashedly left-wing party during his undergraduate days - his generation, as he pointed out, seemed to enjoy a more democratic atmosphere.

And although he did not last long as a member (he claims it was because of his inclination for fun things like dancing and chatting up girls), he has not ceased to sympathise with what the party stands for.

It is partly sentimental - his father formed PRM in 1955 after coming out of political detention - and partly to do with his conviction that society needs people who are willing to put what they believe in to the test and at the risk of personal hardship and sacrifice.

Indeed, there are very few PRM leaders who have not suffered for their politics.

For instance, Abdul Razak's political activities caused him to quit a promising civil service career and to this day, his private legal practice remains modest because potential corporate clients are wary of his politics.

And every single one of its presidents has been "a guest of his Majesty".

Boestamam himself was twice detained - first by the colonial regime in 1955 and then by the Alliance Government in 1962.

"The last time he was detained, I was already quite grown up ... I think we were more sad than he was," says Rustam by way of explaining how politics for people like his father was something of a vocation.

And, of course, dissolving the party was something that never crossed his father's mind either.

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