

# A ploy to win Chinese votes?

## But DAP leaders deny quit move linked to election

Comment by **V. Gayathri**

**KUCHING, Sun:** Finally, the DAP has quit the Opposition coalition. And, as the DAP leaders have been saying in the last three months, it was bound to happen.

It was just the timing of the decision which came yesterday, when the party's central executive committee (CEC) voted to leave the coalition.

But why now, when all political parties are busy with the Sarawak state election? After three formal meetings and many discussions, the DAP and PAS leaders could have at least waited for the election to be over to make the announcement.

Maybe not so. The talk here is that DAP had to make a stand as it was losing support among non-Muslim voters in the state, where the party is vying for at least 11 predominantly Chinese seats. Yesterday's quit decision was quickly conveyed to its supporters, who appeared to breathe a sigh of relief.

Those who advocate that the party will be able to regain lost ground if it breaks away from PAS will point to Sarawak, where DAP claims that the government propaganda to discredit the party for sell-

Chinese votes because of the alliance with PAS.

Selangor DAP treasurer T. Kannan said: "The Sarawak DAP had pulled out of the state opposition coalition in November, yet many party supporters wondered if it was really true.

"They were afraid that a vote for DAP was a vote for an Islamic state."

However, Wong, who opposed the alliance with PAS, said the decision was not linked to the election as the party had contemplated the move for some time.

It's true that DAP's disagreements with PAS over the nature of the future Malaysian state the Islamic party aspires for became more obvious about two months ago, but the fact that DAP decided to leave the Alternative Front yesterday sent a clear signal that Chinese

that could impinge the interests and sensitivities of different communities.

The decision was made yesterday by the DAP CEC after party leaders met Hadi, Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, PAS secretary-general Nasharudin Mat Isa, vice-presidents Datuk Mustafa Ali and Datuk Dr Hassan Ali and central working committee member Hishamuddin Yahya, in Kuala Lumpur.

The motion was adopted with 13 CEC members voting to leave the coalition, two voting to stay and three abstentions. The rest of the 27 CEC members were absent and Kerk said that had they attended the meeting, they too would have voted for the break away.

"The situation has always been about 80% of the leadership being unhappy with the alliance

also a sticky issue among the opposition parties.

The general sentiment is that PAS and DAP were never compatible because of their ideological differences, yet they could work side by side in a cordial environment.

The same, however, cannot be said for Keadilan, which the two senior parties find at times worrying and possibly a threat in the coalition.

The battle for seats, in Lunas last year and in Sarawak now, between DAP and Keadilan have also made the coalition untenable but Kerk said that did not force the party to come out of the coalition.

The fear among DAP leaders is that now it is out of the front, Keadilan might just pick and groom representatives for non-Malay areas that are DAP strongholds.

For PAS, which tends to focus on target seats, Keadilan's tactics of bulldozing into all constituencies, could result in a tattered opposition, whose candidates are bound to clash.

Here, Keadilan has fielded candidates where PAS and DAP had expressed strong chances of winning. In all, Keadilan with a team of former BN and DAP members and leaders, is contesting in 25 constituencies while DAP has earmarked 13 and PAS, three.



**'We accept it, but the fact remains that we are united against a common enemy - the BN.'**

- Nasharuddin

voters are still important and that the party is not going to take its support-

with PAS, especially when it insisted on the Islamic state issue, and now the

ing its supporters out to appease PAS is scaring the Chinese voters away.

With five days to polling, this announcement came as a blessing as the DAP can now focus on issues, rather than trying to make apologies for PAS's intentions, to woo Chinese voters back. It appears in some areas in Kuching and Sibul that the DAP might just walk away with at least four seats.

In the last election in 1996, DAP won three seats, but had only one at the dissolution of the state assembly on Sept 3.

State DAP chairman Richard Wong Ho Leng, the incumbent in Bukit Assek in Sibul, is challenged by Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) candidate Daniel Ngieng Kiong Ann in what is considered a tough seat for the Barisan Nasional (BN).

"To some of us, there is still a lot of confusion as to why the leaders picked yesterday to make the announcement. But over here, the state DAP wanted an assurance from the federal level that it was not going to lose anymore

ers' loyalty for granted.

Party secretary-general Kerk Kim Hock said the reason for the pullout was solely the dispute with PAS that had reached a serious level about two months ago when PAS leaders, namely its president Datuk Fadzil Noor and Terengganu Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, made public statements about their aim to set up an Islamic state, despite being part of the opposition coalition.

"Of course there were some DAP members who expressed unhappiness with the alliance from the beginning, but that did not warrant a serious and lengthy discussion until PAS publicly stated its intentions that breached the coalition's manifesto and understanding," Kerk said.

At the final meeting, the two parties failed to reach a consensus on three points that demanded a commitment not to set up a theocratic state, but they agreed that the coalition would be given notice and consulted over any proposed enactments in Kelantan and Terengganu

balance has tipped further in that direction," Kerk said.

Some Barisan Nasional leaders have described DAP's decision as wise. This is natural because it vindicates the ruling party's view that never the twain shall meet.

But PAS and DAP insist that the separation is not really the end.

Nasharudin said PAS had expected the move, judging from the negotiations and the sentiments of the DAP supporters.

"We proposed further discussions but DAP leaders said they wanted to refer it to the CEC," he said. "We got the sense that they would be making the announcement. We accept it but the fact remains that we are united against a common enemy and that is the BN."

Nasharudin said that there are common issues that the parties will fight for.

Kerk confirmed that DAP had indicated post-alliance options but did not go into details as to whether they will form electoral pacts, which are

As some observers said earlier during the height of the crisis between DAP and PAS, it is left to be seen what the stand of the other two coalition partners - Keadilan and Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM) is and if they are only concerned about winning seats.

"Its (Keadilan's) lack of commitment to the coalition is even more obvious if we look at how it has fielded candidates during the 1999 general election, recent by-elections and now in Sarawak where the other opposition parties stand a better chance of winning. Keadilan has spent more energy on that, rather than to try and make the coalition work," a local DAP member said.

While the Sarawak election may have hastened DAP's departure from the Alternative Front, a victory for Keadilan could mark the start of a difficult relationship for the remaining members.

The merger of Keadilan and PRM may first pose a challenge to PAS and DAP and only later to their avowed enemy, the Barisan Nasional.