

Keadilan still clueless about grassroots needs

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When Parti Keadilan Nasional leaders found out that Parti Bersatu Sabah had decided to return to Barisan Nasional, they openly declared they were ready to fill the vacuum.

Keadilan leaders bravely stated that, together with PAS, they were prepared to play a bigger role in Sabah, including winning seats held by PBS.

It's wishful thinking. When the opposition front was formed before the 1999 general election, efforts were made to get the PBS to join the grouping, but the Kadazan-based party politely turned down the offer.

The PBS, with its large Christian membership base, understood the implications of working with PAS, which had never dropped its Islamic state ambition. The DAP, failing to understand the sentiments of its core supporters, went ahead with the partnership and paid a heavy price.

Of the 48 state seats in Sabah, at least 18 are predominantly Kadazan. While not all Kadazans are Christians, many among the community's leaders are - including party president Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan and his deputy, Dr Maximus Ongkili, who is a lay preacher.

Many of the church groups in Sabah, especially in the Kadazan areas, have played crucial roles in local politics.

One of Keadilan's biggest flaws is its inability to grasp grassroots sentiments, especially among non-Muslims, despite trying hard to be a multi-racial party.

This could be due to the poor interaction of its non-Muslim leaders with the grassroots. Unlike the MCA and MIC, which have strong community links, Keadilan's non-Muslim leaders do not have such communal networking.

Many of Keadilan's non-Muslim leaders are professionals and academics who may represent middle class sentiments but have little contact with the working class. The Chinese and Indian leaders are unknowns in their own communities.

For example, when Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was finance minister, he refused to cut interest rates for loans, which hurt many businessmen and traders.

Although the currency control decision was criticised by opposition leaders, for businessmen caught in the madness of the daily currency fluctuations, the imposition

allowed them to plan their budget better.

The ordinary Chinese and Indian voters, mostly in the private sector, were also worried about losing their jobs in the 1999 recession.

Civil servants and university lecturers, who did not have to worry about losing their government jobs, had no inkling about the sentiments of the Chinese and Indian voters.

While enjoying their low-interest rate loans as civil servants, they did not care about the frustrations of the non-Malays against the financial policies of Anwar. It was with some relief for the public when Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad took over the job and made the necessary adjustments.

Keadilan leaders thought that their *reformasi* slogan was enough to generate votes. They were wrong. As a result, Keadilan lost badly while PAS, contesting in Malay-majority areas, fared well.

The DAP was humiliated in the Chinese-majority areas as they refused to listen to the community's objection to working with PAS.

During the recent Sarawak elections,



Keadilan and PAS were again beaten badly. Until today, Iban voters still joke about a PAS campaigner, in his *serban* and flowing robe, going around shaking hands while wearing gloves.

Among the Muslims in Sarawak, they found it hard to accept the hostile politics practised by PAS and Keadilan.

In the next general election, the aftermath of the Sept 11 incident will be a crucial factor. PAS, like it or not, is regarded as an extremist party and its open support for the Taliban seems out of sync with the non-Muslims.

If Keadilan ignores this by continuing to stress on its link with PAS, it will lose more seats.

If the DAP takes on Keadilan, the two parties will split the opposition votes. Even if they work out a pact, it would not necessarily help either party - such a tie-up will be regarded as an unholy pact.

Keadilan leaders, especially the academics, cannot expect to measure the sentiments of the grassroots by merely reading anti-government websites and international magazines.